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"ALLA SAME LIKEE 'MELICAN MAN!"

The scene was the railway station at Denver, the Queen City of the Plains.

The subject of remark was a young girl who had just stepped from the cross-continent train from the Golden Gate.

The little maiden was sorely beset by a lot of burly hackmen.

One insisted on carrying her lap-dog. One would have led her off bodily by the arm. The rest crowded around, bawling at her like so many madmen.

"Hellow, you fellow! What do you mean?"

And the Jehu who had carried business zeal so far as to lay his hand on the person of the little lady had it struck away with a force that spun him half-round.

The whole set fell back to a more respectful distance; and turning his back upon them, the stranger lifted his hat with a polite:

"I beg your pardon, miss! You appear to be disappointed in finding friends to meet you. If you will allow me to protect you from these roughs, I assure you it will be a pleasure to serve you in any way."

A pair of the loveliest and most innocent eyes he had ever seen were raised to his face.

Roguish dimples and a saucy light in the clear eyes marked this plump little damsel as a right jolly companion where fun was in prospect; and she had the wide-awake air of one who could hold her own.

"Oh, sir! you are exceedingly kind," she said, in a voice of laughing music. "I expected my uncle to be in waiting for me."

And she looked about among the hurrying people, all intent on their own affairs.

"If you will describe him, I will aid your search," said the young man, admiring the creamy whiteness of her complexion and the golden beauty of her blonde hair.

The blue eyes flashed round upon him, and the red lips broke into a merry smile.

"Oh! I don't know him by sight, myself. I have never so much as seen a picture of him. He is tall and spare; and that's the end of my information."

"Indeed? You are in a dilemma."

"But of course I expect him to recognize me. He has my picture."

"He is to be congratulated."

But a quick drooping of the eyelids warned the would-be gallant that his compliment was a little too broad.

He had a chance to correct that blunder when, the bustling crowd having left the depot, it became apparent that our little heroine was doomed to disappointment.

She looked somewhat dismayed; when he again came to her relief.

"If your destination is anywhere in the city, a carriage will take you safely to the door."

"But it isn't. I am to go off into the mountains, or out on the plains—I don't know just where—to a sheep ranch."

The stranger dropped his eyes a single instant, to hide the light that leaped into them.

His manner became more insinuatingly polite, as he said:

"That's a little awkward; but I guess we can get round it without serious inconvenience. If you will allow me to take you to a hotel for dinner, we can leave a man here on the lookout for your relative. It will only be necessary to have your names."

"You are very clever at seeing your way out of a difficulty. My name is Edith Vernon; and my uncle's—"

"Can it be possible?"

The burst of surprise and keen pleasure was instantly followed by an odd sort of embarrassment.

"The deuce and all!" muttered the young man to himself. "I'm in for it with a vengeance! What a go! And row?—whew!—if it ever comes out! But hang the row! It's worth all it will ever cost. I'll work it for what there is in it. So here goes!"

"Can what be possible?" asked the girl, with widening eyes.

"That your uncle is Deacon Jones."

"Deacon Jones?"

"I beg your pardon!"—with a short laugh. "Abednego Strong-in-the-right Swayne—Deacon Jones for short."

"My uncle's name may be a little peculiar; but I don't thank you for your disrespectful nickname!"

"Far be it from me to slight the dignity of one whom I honor—not to consider his relationship to you."

She was not blind to the twinkle that lurked behind the mask of mock gravity.

"You seem to know Mr. Swayne."

"Intimately."

Then lifting his hat and extending his hand:

"Allow me to salute you a little more cordially."

In a flash the little lady drew herself up; and with heightened color and unflinching eye, declared indignantly:

"I don't understand you, sir!"

"You will," said the young man, still proffering his hand, unabashed by her severity, "when I introduce myself as Jonathan God's-grace Swayne, at your service!"

Edith only stared at him open-mouthed.

"A rather formidable name, isn't it?" he asked—"which I owe to the blue-nosed tastes of my revered progenitors, but which I hope you will some day—even with your well-known aversion to nicknames!—clip to Jack."

"Why, then," cried Edith, breathlessly, "uncle Abe is—"

"The author of my being!"—solemnly.

"Your father!"

"Exactly."

"And you—"

"Ah! in that the gods are truly kind! I have the rare felicity of being your cousin!"

"But, wait! wait!" panted Edith, excitedly, the hand still held out for her acceptance embarrassing her not a little. "I did not know that uncle Abe had a son."

"Nor I that I was so blessed, until you declared your name. But when you come to know Deacon Jo—I beg your pardon!—Abednego Strong-in-the-right Swayne and Mercy Mehtable, his wife, you won't wonder at a trifle of eccentricity like that."

"But if you knew nothing about me, how came you to associate my name with uncle Abe the moment you heard it?"

"Why, you see, I heard that one Edith Vernon was expected to domicile with us; but I understood that it was a cousin of my father's—a schoolmarm from somewhere over the divide."

"I a schoolma'am? I am just out of school!"

"But I thought you an ancient mariner, just out of the Mayflower, with gimlet eyes, corkscrew curls, a vinegarish voice, and a rooted belief that birch grew expressly for the benefit of small boys. I left home to avoid meeting you as long as possible. Just think of that!"

And he made such a wry face that Edith laughed gleefully.

"But, sir, I'm not your cousin, after all! I call uncle Abe 'uncle' only because he was my papa's friend, and is now my guardian."

"Not my cousin? That does me! But you'll take my hand, won't you?"

"Oh, yes!"

"That's something! Thank you!"

"Isn't it funny that you should happen upon me, uncle Abe being detained? What should I have done?"

"Without me? Ah! now you're charming! But the fact is we weren't expecting you until Saturday."

"That was my first letter."

"And you wrote later, changing the date?"

"Yes."

"That accounts for the balk. But, I say! now that you're here, we'll have two days to paint the town red, while we're waiting for the dea—ahem—the gov'nor."

"I don't think you a very dutiful son!"

"But you'll find me a prince of escorts! They hang me up at every ice-cream saloon in the place; and as for the theater—well! well!"

There was a dash about Jack Swayne which pleased Edith, in spite of some little misgivings as to his careless reference to his father.

She readily fell in with his plans, yielding up her checks, which called for two immense trunks.

"But that isn't all of us," she said, with a laugh, turning round.

"Eh! What in the name of all that's wonderful is this?" cried Jack.

The cause of his astonishment was a young Celestial, who stood demurely behind his mistress, in his junk shoes, with his pagoda hat, his pigtail, his "shirt outside his trowsers," and a bamboo rod balanced on his shoulder, a band-box suspended at one end and a bundle at the other.

"That's Little Ah Sin," was Edith's laughing introduction.

"You don't mean to say that this is a part of your— What shall I call it? Luggage?"

"He is my escort—'alla same likee 'Melican man! Did you suppose I had come all the way from Frisco entirely alone?"

Jack Swayne stared.

Little Ah Sin smiled with the blandness for which his countrymen are noted.

"Hang the wooden image! What shall I do with him?" muttered Jack to himself, in no slight chagrin.

But he covered his annoyance under his wonted banter.

"I can understand a lap-dog, or a parrot, or even a monkey; but what use you can have for a pet Pagan surpasses my comprehension."

"Oh! he is no end of fun!" laughed Edith. "And please to remember that he is not a pet animal, but a human being."

"I suppose so. But what do you do with him?"

"I keep him to do things for me, and to amuse me. And he isn't such an insufferable plague as are all the American boys I ever saw, I can assure you."

"He's to go with us, then, I suppose?"

"Why, of course! Would you leave him here?"

"I'd have left him in Chinese Tartary, if my taste had been consulted!" muttered Jack to himself. "I heartily wish he was in Tophet, now!"

However, he affected outward unconcern, and bundled Little Ah Sin into the carriage with them, somewhat to the surprise of Edith, who would have set him outside with the driver.

He was on the point of following, when a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder, and a stern voice said:

"Come, sir! This thing has gone quite far enough! What do you purpose to do with that child?"

Jack turned with a smothered oath.

Startled by the abruptness of the challenge, Edith looked through the carriage door, and beheld the oddest-looking man she had ever seen.

He was full six feet in stature, and so thin that the flimsy linen duster which he wore, increasing his apparent height by its length, hung upon him as if upon a skeleton.

Round-shouldered, he seemed to be collapsing, as if too weak to hold himself erect.

His face was long and gaunt, with hollow cheeks and sunken eyes, glowing in their cavernous depths with startling intensity.

His faded yellow hair hung lank on either side, and his chin-whiskers, the rest of his face being clean-shaven, seemed to draw down the corners of his mouth.

His voice sounded as if it came up out of a grave.

Having arrested Jack's entrance into the carriage, he did not look at him, but kept his gaze fixed upon Edith.

The girl felt a chill of something like fear creep over her. She guessed who it was, even before Jack stammered:

"This—this—is Miss Vernon!"

"I am aware of the fact without your help, said the new-comer, in slow, monotonous tones. "You need not take the trouble to introduce me. I can make myself known. Begone, sir!"

And without looking at Jack, he waved him away.

White with suppressed passion, Jack stood a moment with clinched hands and blazing eyes. Then turning to Edith, he said, quietly and deliberately:

"Miss Vernon, you see the constraint under which I leave you. I hope to see you again in more favorable circumstances."

And bowing to her, he turned upon his heel and walked away, swearing that he would have revenge for the humiliation put upon him.

CHAPTER II.

A PRECIOUS LOT.

"CURSE him! he's sat down on me for good; and he'll never let up while his old rack of bones holds together. I knew he'd put a spoke in my wheel with that little beauty. To think that he has kept it dark all these years! But I'll get square with him, if it takes a leg! And I won't give up Little Sweetness either. By Jove! she's a darling!"

So, between his rage at his father and his enthusiastic admiration for Edith, Jack sought one of the gilded palaces of vice of which the Western metropolis boasts not a few, where the rattle of dice responded to the clink of glasses on the marble bar.

The moment he entered the door he was hailed by a party of young roisterers who gathered about a table, losing their money to one another with a great deal of wrangling and not a little rum-guzzling.

Their hats were set on the back part of their heads, or pulled down over their eyes, or canted far on one side, in various styles of recklessness. All had cigars and liquor; and those who were not rattling the dice-box looked scowlingly on, "dead broke."

"Hallo, Jack! Where in Cain have you been?"

"I'll bet he's been up to no good, anywhere."

"Ha! ha! ha! You may count on that. Jack Swayne is nobody's saint; and don't you forget it!"

"What's the matter with your jaw, old man?"

"He's as glum as if he'd just come from his father confessor!"

"Ho! ho! Jack at confession! He wouldn't so disgrace his bringing-up!"

There was a general laugh at this sally. Jack's departure from the law of his fathers was a never failing theme for the witticisms of his friends.

"Oh! give us a rest!" he cried, half in annoyance, and half in accord with their humor.

"Give you something to drink. That's more like it, old boy."

Then, calling across the room to the bar-keeper, the speaker shouted:

"Ho! you, Sam! Trot out something hyere to shorten up Jack Swayne's mug!"

Jack was received into the crowd in a way which showed that he was a general favorite and a leader among these young reprobates.

The dice box was thrust into his hand, with the laughing recommendation:

"Chuck-a-luck! Try your luck!"

"You're sure to win, if you don't get stuck!"

He, nothing loth, spilled the dice with the air of one to whom it was not an unaccustomed sport.

Then the old scene was renewed, with Jack Swayne's voice heard oftener and more profanely than any one's else.

He played recklessly, losing the more he drank, and drinking the more he lost.

At last he rose, with the laconic declaration:

"Strapped!"

By that time the whole party was fired with liquor so as to be ready for any sort of devilment.

They left the saloon in a body, mounted some mustangs, dashed through the streets at a break-neck pace, yelling like Comanches, then away over the plains toward the foothills.

They were a half-score of young blades, the sons of more or less well-to-do parents, who spent their time in riot.

So dare-devil were some of their exploits, that old heads had long since predicted that they would one day "run up a tree."

But so far their fathers' money, as a last resort, had bought off justice in their worst scrapes; and they had kept within the point at which the Vigilance Committee interferes.

"I say, gent!" cried Jack Swayne, as they rode along, "this racket has petered out dead flat."

"That's what I say!" corroborated another dissatisfied one.

"We didn't have rocks enough to start on."

"That's what's the matter! I call it a blasted shame, if we can't raise the wind some way so's to have one red-hot fling!"

"Hang it all! My old man screws me down so tight that I never have enough to hold out till the turn in my luck."

"You're no worse off than I am. The governor has shut down altogether. He swears that if I want any money after this, I'll have to turn to and earn it, or steal it;—he'll be hanged if he'll pave the road to perdition for me any longer!"

"We're all in the same box, or soon will be. After that last pinch, my head-center said that if I ever got dropped onto again, I might go to jail for all him."

The subject thus broached, all gave in their testimony; and it appeared that, to a man, they had worn out the patience of their respective parents.

To judge from the tone of complaint, all felt ill used.

Only one listened serenely, without joining in the general murmur.

"Hyere's Wade—he hain't got nothin' to say!" observed one.

"Confound him!—he has no cause. He cleans us out, so that he's always heeled anyway!"

"Don't squeal, Tommy, so long as you lose your money on the square," said Wade, coolly. "We can't all be wooden-heads, you know."

"I'd give something for your sleight!" muttered the fellow addressed as Tommy.

Wade was ready to nip in the bud any covert insinuation against the integrity of his methods.

"I have sleight of another kind that I'll be happy to let you sample, whenever you call for it!" he said, with meaning.

"Keep yer shirt on!" was Jack Swayne's cool recommendation.

He always interfered to head off trouble, and with authority.

"See hyere, gents," he went on. "Suppose

we could make a strike of—say a cool thousand?"

"Make it a million. It don't cost anything to suppose."

"I don't waste my time in your tom-fool way. When I talk business, I talk business."

"What's the show now?"

"What I said. A thousand, if you've got the nerve to collar it."

The interest now became general. The party had had evidence in the past of Jack's fertility of resource.

"But you don't get anything for nothing in this world, ye understand," he warned.

"What's wanted in this case, Jack?"

"Nerve, I told you."

"You've tried us before in that line. You know that we don't balk at trifles."

"Well, you'll have to take a bigger contract than you've ever had on your hands."

"We've sampled everything but murder, haven't we, Jack?"

The crowd laughed, as they recalled past deeds of recklessness.

"Well," said Jack, "if I let you into this thing, I don't want any crawfishing."

"Try us, old man!"

"Will you risk a chance for five years in the lock-up?—for a cool thousand remember."

A sudden gravity came over the faces. Then some laughed recklessly.

"That ain't the royal road to riches!" suggested one.

To which another added:

"Jordan am a hard road to trabble, I believe!"

And a third:

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained! I ain't afraid to follow where Jack Swayne ain't afraid to lead!"

"I'm with you, my jolly boys!"

"Count me in!"

"Me too!"

"This chicken can scratch gravel with the best of you!"

"Hold on! Give me a hand before the cards are all run out!"

"So say we, all of us!"

"Drive ahead, Jack. There's no weak knees in this gang."

"Even with a right smart show for neck-stretching?" asked Jack, still holding off.

"Hang the difference! In for a shilling, in for a pound!"

"That's so! We're goin' the whole hog!"

"Now's your chance to pass out," still urged Jack.

But no one had the nerve to show the white feather now, even if he felt any misgivings. Goaded on by the dare-devil spirit, they became the more eager the graver the risk.

"Well," said Jack, finally, "I don't propose to put my neck in the halter without some sort of pledge that the noose is not to be tied by one of my pals."

"That's what we want all round."

"We've stuck together so far like a tramp and his dirty shirt."

"That's so. If there had been a sneak in the gang, what we've been through would have made him show his hand before this."

"That's all right," persisted Jack; "but you'd better have things a little too tight than not quite tight enough. Pull up here, and we'll fix it in no time."

They drew up in a circle, with their horses' heads to the center.

Jack then dictated an oath binding each and all to secrecy touching everything pertaining to the proposed project.

"Now, then," he said, in conclusion, "you still have another chance to back out."

But no one availed himself of it, though one or two were unusually grave.

"Very well! Hyere's the scheme. My old man is in Denver, with a thousand dollars in his pocket. Been settling up a little sheep account."

"Day after to-morrow he will be in Dead-man's Pass not far from sun-set. You know the stage time as well as I do."

"If, now, a party of masked road-agents pull up that particular stage—"

"And get shot for their pains!" interposed Wade, quietly.

"Not by the deacon," was Jack's assurance.

"If you knew him as well as I do, you would know that he has an unconquerable horror of fire-arms. He never will carry so much as a toothpick."

"Why not?" was the curious question.

"You tell," said Jack. "I reckon it's his religion."

"But there are religious men in this community that go heeled all the same."

"He don't. And that's enough for us."

No one expressed any surprise at Jack's willingness to rob his own father. If there was anything peculiar about his scheme, it was that he should let others profit with him.

He forthwith explained that.

"But the loot ain't all that he fetches from Denver," he went on. "He's got a little daisy that the hussies about hyere can't hold a candle to. That's my game!"

"What! Do you mean to steal her too?"

"I mean to make a big try to get the inside track of the deacon. He has sat down on me, of course. He'll fill her little head with my wickedness, and all that rot."

"And make out a confounded good case!" laughed one of the crowd.

"The pot can't call the kettle black!"

"Oh, that's so! We ain't any of us saints."

"Well, suppose a band of road-agents—terrible fellows, you know!—were to capture the little lady—for ransom, of course; and then that one Jack Swayne was to rescue her, with appropriate dare-devil risks and hair-breadth escapes?"

"By Jove! that's no fool of a plan!"

"Thank you! That's my plan! You're welcome to the money. I want the girl."

"You shall have her, my boy!"

"We're to play road-agent?"

"It looks as if our necks were to go into that halter!"

"For a hundred dollars apiece! Cheap!"

"What in Cain are you whining about? Am I in the habit of asking others to rake my chest-nuts out of the fire for me?"

"No! I'll be hanged if you are, Jack!"

"Then wait until you're hurt before you squeal!"

"Go ahead, Jack. Let us have it all."

"I propose to act as the head-center of that road-agent band! What more do you want than that?"

"Nothing."

"I do all the talking; and if there is any one to be given away, it's I."

"We couldn't ask anything fairer than that."

"But our horses?" objected a cautious one.

"They'll be spotted—every last one of 'em!"

"Exactly!" said Jack. "We'll do the spotting as a part of the masquerade."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed one who was somewhat disposed to play the flunky to Jack. "I call that good! We spot our horses so that they may not be 'spotted' by some one else!"

So the plot was formed. Let us see what came of it.

CHAPTER III.

A HEATHEN CHAMPION.

EDITH had made no reply to Jack's parting salute. She was afraid to interfere in this quarrel between father and son.

She did not even look after him. His father's unwavering gaze held her as if by fascination.

Abednego Swayne had waited with the impassivity of an automaton while his son had his say. When Jack was gone, he spoke in the same dead, mechanical way:

"My dear, it has pleased Divine Justice to afflict me with an ungodly son. I do not murmur. The punishment is meet. My sins have been as scarlet!"

"I saw the meeting with you. I waited for evidence of his ruthless profligacy—his contempt for the most sacred human ties. He has expressed the hope of meeting you again; but as you would shield the lamb from the wolf, pray God to stand between you and him. Amen!"

There was something horrible in this cold-blooded denunciation of his own son. A canting, Puritanical whine in the voice of the man before her gave Edith a cue to his character. She was far more repelled by him than by the younger man against whom he warned her.

"This is uncle Abednego?" she asked, timidly.

It was noticeable that she gave him his full name, instead of the affectionate abbreviation with which she had spoken of him to Jack.

"It is one who was your father's friend, before—before—"

A huskiness seemed to choke him. He broke off and dropped his head, murmuring:

"God's mercy be upon him!"

Then, in a still lower voice, almost inaudible, he added:

"And upon me, a sinner!"

The girl's heart swelled with quick gratitude and remorse. Tears sprung into her eyes.

What was his outward appearance, if he so loved her dear dead papa?

With a sob she sprung out of the carriage, crying:

"Dear uncle Abel! forgive me!"

And before he was aware of her purpose, she caught his gaunt, bony hand, and pressed her virgin lips upon it.

It was his right hand.

With a gasping cry he snatched it away from her and thrust it behind him, shrinking back as if in terror.

"No! no! Oh, God!"

Then a blood-curdling shudder passed over him, and he seemed to collapse, his head dropping upon his breast, and his arms hanging limp at his sides.

The girl stared at him, frightened at the effect of her impulsive act—too much bewildered to feel hurt at its reception.

In a low voice, almost like a death-rattle, she heard him mutter:

"It is the vengeance of offended Majesty! Chasten thy servant, oh, God!"

In terror the girl cried out:

"Uncle Abel!"

Yet she dared not touch him again.

He recovered himself as with a strong effort, passed his hand across his forehead, and said:

"There! there, my dear! I have startled you. Don't mind me. I am as the smoking flax. If you see me sometimes falter beneath the burden of the wrath of the Righteous Judge, learn to pass it by. The curse that rests upon one of His most sinful creatures cannot cloud your young life. Father, hide her in the hollow of Thy hand! Amen!"

He took one of her hands in his, and laid his other across her shoulders, and with his fatherly caress bent and touched his lips to her forehead.

His hand was cold and clammy. His lips, but for their tremulousness, might have been the lips of a dead man!

The girl shuddered in spite of herself.

Abednego Swayne then dismissed the hackman with a silver quarter dollar, known in the West as "two bits," and there held in about the same esteem that a "nickel" is in the East.

It appeared that he was not the kind of customer the Jehu cared to have any contention with; for venting his discontent by lashing his horses, he drove off muttering some choice specimens of very emphatic "French,"—with Western variations!

"Let us not pamper ourselves with sloth and vainglory," said Abednego Swayne to Edith, with a canting drawl. "Your limbs are young and strong; and we have not far to walk. There is no praise more acceptable to Heaven than a proper use of the powers mercifully vouchsafed to us."

With not a little misgiving did Edith draw his attention to Little Ah Sin, whom he had thus far ignored. She found herself suddenly in doubt as to how so unusual an addition to a young lady's belongings would be received.

Under the penetrating gaze of his inquisitor Little Ah Sin stood with downcast eyes, as placid as the cat that never was in the cream-jar.

"What is this?" was the slow demand.

"He is my little servant," said Edith.

"Your servant? A strange freak, is it not? He cannot fill the office of a maid."

"Oh, no! of course not. But he is clever in a hundred ways. He is so much quicker and neater and handier than half the help one can get, that I thought aunt Mercy would be glad to have him about the house."

At this point Little Ah Sin seemed to think it about time to put in a word for himself; so he said:

"China boy largee sabe alla house pidgin—washee, cookee, makee bed—alla chop-chop. That mississee Joss pidgin man, he chin-chin mi number-one good chancee."

This, being translated, was an assurance that he could do all kinds of housework well and quickly, and that the minister's wife would find him a good bargain.

Edith smiled in spite of her anxiety.

Abednego Swayne's iron features never relaxed. He expressed no wish to have what had been said made intelligible to him.

Coldly, sternly he said:

"A worshiper of Belial!—an abomination in the sight of the Lord!"

At that Edith sprung to the rescue warmly.

"I took him from a rabble of young hoodlums who were abusing him shamelessly!" she cried. "I'd pit his Paganism against their Christianity, any day!"

Abednego Swayne turned his slow eyes upon her face, flushed as it was with generous ardor, and then despondently shook his head, muttering:

"A firebrand in a household of God's servants!"

He made no further opposition to Little Ah Sin, but led the way to a hotel, comfortable, yet far less pretentious than the one Jack would have patronized.

From Denver their journey was continued by stage.

For two days they traversed the crags and chasms of the American Wonderland, the jolting of the coach being compensated by the magnificence of the scenery.

In the gathering dusk of the second day, Edith was trying to get into a position of a little less discomfort, to take a nap, if possible, when there came a startling interruption.

"Halt! Hands up!" cried a voice out in the road.

"I hear you, boss. Don't shoot!" came the deep bass, nearer at hand, of the stage-driver.

And with a wrench that nearly threw Edith out of her seat, the swaying vehicle was brought to a stand-still.

"Uncle Abel!" cried the girl in affright, seizing him by the arm.

Her guardian sat upright, motionless, and said not a word. Seen in the gloom, his set features looked to her as if cast in bronze.

Without were the sounds of the restless coach-horses and the thud of other approaching hoofs. A reckless, dare-devil voice said:

"Ef you hain't got an insurance policy on the top of your head, Johnny, hold as you are."

"Don't mind me, 'gents," replied the stage-driver. "I pass out, an' leave my ante in the pot!"

A horseman came to the side of the coach and roughly tore the door open.

"Hello, there! you inside!" he cried, with a swagger as if he were under the influence of liquor. "Come out o' that!"

Without protest Abednego Swayne rose and alighted.

Amazed at his strange demeanor, Edith did not try to detain him. But she sat and trembled.

They had had the coach to themselves in the absence of other passengers; and she was now alone with Little Ah Sin, who occupied the front seat, opposite her.

But if the strange man who seemed so formidable to her dared not offer her protection, what could she hope from a mere boy?

He leaned forward in his seat, staring through the door in the greatest excitement. His hands were thrust into the folds of his baggy blouse. Had he grasped some wooden or China Joss which served him as a talisman?

In the wildest panic at a peril the extent of which she could not measure, yet which her imagination vaguely pictured as horrible beyond expression, the girl was impelled to leap out of the coach on the side opposite the road-agent, and flee away into the thicket that bordered the mountain road.

But fear paralyzed her. She sat panting like a frightened bird.

Either the tongue of the leader of the outlaws was thickened with liquor or he had a pebble in his mouth to disguise his voice; or it is possible that both impeded his articulation.

"Hello! What have we got hyar?" he cried, with an interlarding of oaths which we spare the reader. "A non-combatant, blast his eyes! Hang me ef we hain't bagged the lantern-jawed ranter! He's fat pickin's, he is. He didn't go down to Denver for nothin'—not he! Some sanctimonious swindle, you bet! Come, parson!—plank the loot!"

Abednego Swayne fixed his burning eyes upon the speaker in a steady gaze that would have disconcerted some men. It was not without effect on the outlaw. It increased his reckless swagger.

Without a word a leathern pocket-book was handed forth.

"Hang your two an' six-pence, you infernal humbug!" shouted the outlaw, scornfully. "Do you think I'm nibblin' at such bait? Trot out that waist-belt o' yours; or I'll let a hole into you that you kin drive a goverment mule through!"

The look on Abednego Swayne's face became terrible. He uttered not a word. Not a muscle moved. He was trying to cow the robber with the power of his eye.

Seen in the falling shadows, he looked like the dark embodiment of some awful curse.

The robber only swore with a more abandoned recklessness, brandishing his weapon and threatening instant annihilation in a score of varied forms.

Edith's blood ran cold. She expected to see her guardian shot down before her horrified eyes.

She longed to cry out to him to give up his money. What was money compared with life? But she dared not utter a sound to attract attention to herself. She shrunk into the smallest compass possible, hoping that she might escape discovery.

What was her relief, however, for her guardian, to see him with slow, deliberate movements loosen his garments, and draw forth the belt.

In silence he handed it to the despoiler. So far his iron lips had not once unlocked.

The belt was received with something like a yell of triumph.

The old man dropped his head upon his breast and stood motionless. Was he so parsimonious that the loss of his money had crushed him like that? In all the terror of that situation, Edith felt her respect for him wane.

The triumphant road-agent held the money-belt aloft, and shouted to his comrades.

"How's that, you confounded croakers? Didn't I tell you we'd raise the rocks? But this ain't all. Ain't we to have the girl? Blast yer eyes! what are you infernal cowards skulking off there out of range for, leaving me to do all the work? When it comes to the divy, you won't cry so small, curse you!"

Thus rallied, the others urged forward their horses.

Not waiting for their support, the chief reined his horse close to the coach door, and peering into the darkening interior, cried:

"Come, my beauty! we're wantin' of you!"

Edith gasped in speechless terror. The dread calamity had fallen!

Abednego Swayne started as if suddenly stung by a serpent. He struck an attitude, as if about to spring upon the bandit and tear him from his horse.

But the response to the outlaw's demand did not come from him.

From within the coach came a voice, so excited, so high pitched, hurling such a hail of rapid articulations, that it was almost like the chattering of a frantic monkey.

"Hi yah! Man-man! More better you no makee bobbey 'long that missee! Galah, no pay he walkee, chop-chop catchee killum! China boy inside muchee hot, alla samee that 'Melican fashion! Plentee fight pidgin! He catchee seven piece 'volvo. Largee sabe makee he shoot so fashion makee finishee! S'pose you no git, number-one fool!"

All of which, being translated, meant:

"Hey, there! Stop! You'd better not trouble that young lady! Let her go, I say! or you'll be instantly killed!" etc., etc.

The road-agent turned his head so as to look from Edith to her little champion.

He saw Little Ah Sin half started from his seat, brandishing in one hand a revolver, and in the other a curiously shaped knife, with a wavy blade, like a Malay creese.

The boy's eyes blazed with excitement, and in a stronger light his face would have been seen to be a sickly yellow with pallor.

But in his half-drunken recklessness, the outlaw despised his years.

"You dirty little whelp of a Pagan!" he cried, with an oath, "who told you it was your put-in?"

And disdaining further notice, he reached forth his hand to seize the shrinking Edith's wrist.

Little Ah Sin uttered an inarticulate cry of rage; and the coach rung with the report of his revolver.

Edith shrieked and fainted with terror.

The outlaw uttered a wild cry, and let go her wrist.

With a shrill whinny his horse reared and pivoted round.

Abednego Swayne broke stony silence at last, and with a scream of mad anguish, as if he had been pierced to the heart, sprung forward and clutched the bandit's bridle-rein.

As the beast descended to the earth, the man was knocked down.

And, lo! the road-agents who had been rallied for their half-hearted support wheeled their horses and took to their heels, leaving their chief to get out of the scrape as best he could alone!

"Waal, I sw'ar!" was the astonished comment of the stage-driver.

CHAPTER IV.

A WEIRD HOUSEHOLD.

DESERTED by his followers, the leader of the outlaws made no effort to check the flight of his frightened horse, but permitted himself to be borne after the cowardly fellows who had "taken water" at the first sign of resistance.

Meanwhile he indulged himself in round after

round of execration, treating the fugitives, Little Ah Sin, Abednego Swayne, and himself with equal impartiality.

Overtaking his recreant supporters, he could scarcely restrain his bitter contempt within bounds which even they would endure.

"Pretty fellows you, to pretend to stand at any man's back!" he cried. "If I was one of such a pack of cowards, I'd wear petticoats and have done with it!"

"That's all right!" replied one of the delinquents. "But he who fights and runs away, may live to fight another day!"

"Yes, if you had only done a little fighting!" sneered Jack, bitterly. "But it's precious little fighting any of your crowd will ever do. You run away before it begins!"

"Pard, it's one thing to pull up the coach, and quite another thing to sling the passengers cold. I ain't ready to go to glory yet—not at the end of a rope, anyway!"

"Bah! You were scared off by a little vagabond of a heathen Chinese!"

"If he was such a contemptible little cuss, why didn't you stay and plant him yourself?"

"Could I fetch away the girl alone? And after I had her, what could I do with her? I suppose you'd all have stood by me, and carried out the programme? Oh, yes!—I see you!"

"Well, we've got the money, anyway. That's something."

"For you fellows! How much do you suppose you've earned of it? You've done the heavy standing-round while I did the work."

"Don't flunk on that, Jack. Hang it all, man! you don't want us to swing, so that you may come the gum-game on a girl that you can get just as easy some other way."

But Jack wasn't easily placated.

"It's not only that you've beat me out of what I had set my mind on," he said; "but by your cowardice you've, as like as not, given the whole thing away."

"I don't see that. Nobody said a word but you."

"Oh, you were mum enough! But what set of genuine road-agents would have skedaddled like a flock of frightened sheep, as you did? Any one with half an eye would spot this crowd first shot."

At this there was no little concern, until one suggested an avenue of escape.

"Your old man can't crowd us, Jack, without pinching you. Suppose you make it up with him by returning the loot!"

"Well, you do take the chromo!" cried Jack, contemptuously.

And without deigning further discussion, he put spurs to his horse, and dashed on ahead of the party.

Meanwhile Abednego Swayne had risen from the ground, covered with dirt and bleeding from a wound where the hoof of Jack's horse had grazed his forehead.

Little Ah Sin had greeted the success of his shot with a wild laugh of delight.

"Hi! that b'long one piece heap colo teem that lobbah man he hab got behind side! Maskee he lallee talkee, he lun alla same likee one piece cow chilo!"

But Edith was unconscious; and neither Abednego Swayne nor the driver could understand that he said:

"It's a very cold day when that robber gets left! For all his bluster, he runs like a girl!"

Seeing Edith's state, his excitement returned.

"Hi! you, Joss pidgin man!" he cried, forgetting his respect in his anxiety. "That b'long what thing that missee he catchee? He so 'flaid he no can makee talkee. He no can lookee floo he eye. Mi 'flaid he makee finishee, alla 'long that lobbah man bobbey!"

All of which was pidgin English for:

"Say! parson, what's the matter with my young lady? She's so frightened that she can't speak nor see. I'm afraid she'll die of that thief's insolence."

But Edith was far from "making a finish" of it.

Little Ah Sin whipped out a fan, and began to wave it frantically before her pale face.

But her guardian, wiser than he, quietly put him aside, and laid her on one of the seats, supporting her head and shoulders in his arms over the edge, so that they were a little lower than the rest of her body. The blood being thus allowed to run into the brain, the heart having failed to force it there, she revived almost instantly.

Little Ah Sin's delight knew no bounds. He instantly burst forth:

"Hi; lillee missee! You all lightee; Joss pidgin man, he all lightee; Lillee Ah Sin, he all lightee! That any piece lobbah man, he walkee

chop-chop! China boy he no makee killum one teem. Makee killum two teem, you bet! No makee bobbey 'long that lillee missee! That one piece lobbah man he chin-chin he b'long muchee toposide. China boy he catchee one piece 'volvo; he makee talkee that lobbah man he makee walkee chop-chop no hab got spilun—alla same likee 'Melican man!"

This was Little Ah Sin's crowning triumph—to handle a revolver like a "Melican man," and he threw himself into a menacing attitude, squinting over the barrel of the weapon.

Edith, to whom his higgly-piggly English was perfectly intelligible, understood him to say:

"You're all right; the parson's all right; and I'm all right! That lot of thieves made off in a hurry. I didn't shoot to kill the first time; but I would the next! You shouldn't be hurt! That robber fancied that he was boss; but I took my revolver and ordered him to clear out before he got spoilt!"

Later, when Little Ah Sin detailed this adventure over and over again to her, Edith made ample acknowledgment of her indebtedness to him; but just now she was too much excited to pay much attention to what he was saying.

"Oh! is he gone? Are we safe?" she cried, clinging to her guardian.

Then she saw the blood trickling down his forehead and over his beard, and voiced her quick sympathy.

"But you have been hurt, dear uncle Abe! See! see! how your head is bleeding! What can I do for it?"

"It is nothing!" said Abednego Swayne, shaking his head gloomily. "My sorest wound is not there. Would it were!"

She insisted upon examining it, and upon finding that it was only an abrasion of the skin, stanching the blood with her handkerchief.

"It is the brand of Cain!" said the sufferer, in his deepest, most sepulchral voice. "The hand of an offended God is like the flaming sword that flashed all ways before the gates of Paradise! It findeth us out wherever we may flee!"

The girl shrunk from him in dread. What was the meaning of the dark fanaticism that haunted him?

"Drive on!" he said, to the driver.

Then, sitting with his elbows on his knees, he dropped his face into his hands, and so sat, sunk in profound melancholy.

Little Ah Sin's enthusiasm was chilled. He sat as silent as Edith, peering through the deepening darkness at the strange man with whom their lot was to be cast for good or ill.

It was a relief to both when they drove into a mining-camp where they could once more be surrounded by human beings who had no terrible mystery clinging about them like grave-clothes.

Lanterns gleamed through the blackness of the night; gruff voices hailed and answered one another, with no dearth of profanity; shadowy figures cast gigantic, phantom shapes on the walls of the rude slab buildings; the stage horses exchanged friendly whinnies with their fellows, brought from the stables to relieve them.

In the midst of this—to Edith—strange scene, Abednego Swayne alighted in gloomy silence.

No one greeted him with friendly familiarity.

The men who were slapping one another on the back, or trying to effect an unexpected trip, with good-natured, though rough badinage, stopped their horse-play as he passed.

For some reason of his own, the stage driver had not, in response to the first hail, shouted out the information that they had been "pulled up." He waited until Abednego Swayne was beyond ear-shot, and then made the communication in a low voice.

The men looked curiously at the bowed figure that passed among them like a mistrusting and mistrusted alien. But they asked him no questions, and he volunteered nothing.

A team of well-kept horses was brought out of the stable and hitched to a light farm wagon.

Seated beside her saturnine guardian, with Little Ah Sin perched on one of her trunks behind, Edith was driven away from the coach station, leaving the gleaming lanterns behind, plunging into the black darkness as if into the nether pit!

Then passed hours of unbroken silence. The horses were left to pick their way, their animal instinct a safer guide than human direction.

That the road was strewn with unseen perils on every side was indicated by the pitching and slewing of the wagon, and by the dim perception—partly through sight and partly through hearing—of jutting cliff and yawning chasm.

Edith dared not break in upon the gloomy reverie of the man at her side. From time to

time he muttered or groaned, as if oblivious to his surroundings. She could distinguish now and then only some expression of human sinfulness, or Divine wrath, or an unctuous "Amen!"

Long after midnight they came upon a group of low buildings, where they were greeted by the vociferous barking of several dogs.

But at a stern word from their master the animals slunk away, and stood aloof in silence, looking at him.

A sleepy hostler came out from the stables; but he got his wits about him when he saw who it was, as if he did not care to provoke a rebuke by his stupidity.

Edith stood in the night-chill, utterly wretched and homesick, shrinking from the reception she was to receive in the house which continued as dark and silent as a tomb.

Presently the door opened with unexpected abruptness; and a woman, with a candle held above her head, appeared on the threshold.

But such a woman! She was almost the counterpart of her husband. Tall and gaunt, so that her straight calico gown hung upon her angular shoulders as if on a clothes-horse, the yellow light of the tallow dip, falling from above, brought out the harshness of her sharp features.

With the sallow skin stretched from the high cheek-bones to the clearly-outlined jaw, her hollow cheeks looked like the warped covers of an old vellum-bound book. Her sunken eyes seemed to have caught the weird gleam of her husband's. Her lips were so thin and compressed, that, with its corners drawn down, her mouth formed only a curved line beneath her pointed and drooping nose.

Abednego Swayne and the woman exchanged a glance of silent intelligence. It was as if they needed no words to communicate with each other.

Then the woman looked at Edith as mutely, with a thrilling intensity of inquiry in her eyes.

The girl advanced timidly, and said:

"Aunt Mercy?"

"You are welcome, my dear," said the woman, in a hard, mechanical way, as if her heart lent no warmth to the words her lips framed.

Then she, as her husband had done, took one of the girl's hands, and bending, left a cold, unemotional kiss on her forehead.

As before, Edith turned pale, and with difficulty repressed a convulsive shudder.

Had she come to live with these strange, repulsive people? She felt as if her soul would freeze in their icy atmosphere. And what was this horror that hung over both of them like a pall?

Without a word further she followed her hostess into the house, the flaring flame of the candle revealing to her curious and apprehensive glance a room almost as barren of comforts as a soldiers' barrack.

There was a rag carpet on the floor. A pine table, stained black, and having a scant and much-faded cover, stood against the wall, bearing a well-worn family Bible, a copy of Fox's "Book of Martyrs," Baxter's "Saints' Rest," and a work on demonology. A few straight-backed chairs, a large wooden rocker, which looked uncomfortable enough to be an engine of torture, an armless settle and a footstool completed the furnishing of the desolate place. The walls were of unpapered deal boards, the joists being exposed overhead. A brass candlestick on the mantelpiece was the nearest approach to anything ornamental in the room.

Passing through this room, up a narrow box stairway, Edith was shown immediately to her chamber.

It was as small and bare as a prison cell. It contained only a bunk-bed of pine and a single chair. No table, no wash-stand, no bureau—not even so much as a little triangular bit of looking-glass nailed against the wall!

Later, Edith found that in this strange household a mirror was regarded as a device of the devil to ensnare the soul through vanity.

A row of nails driven into the wall behind the door served as a wardrobe.

"We breakfast at five," said Mrs. Swayne, with a face so set, and in tones so cold and hard, that it seemed as if she were administering a rebuke; "but, as I suppose you have not slept and are tired, you will not be called in the morning, but can sleep as late as you wish. Good-night."

And closing the door, she walked off with the candle, leaving Edith dumb with surprise, in the dark.

Later, she learned that it was taken for granted that every one should go to bed without a light.

"Economy," said Abednego Swayne, "is one

of God's first laws. Sinful wastefulness brings all other iniquities in its train."

Without removing her clothes, the girl threw herself on the bed, and burst into an agony of tears.

"Oh, I cannot stay in this dreadful place!" she cried to herself. "I shall die! I shall die!"

For a time it seemed as if her heart would burst. She had to bury her face in the pillow, to stifle the cries that rose from her aching breast.

But she was exhausted by her long journey, the excessive strain on her nerves since she had been in the company of her guardian, and the want of sleep; and in the reaction following her paroxysm of weeping, she sunk into a troubled drowse.

The nightmare that followed took its coloring from a picture she had once seen of Dante's Inferno.

She dreamed that she was in the midst of a boundless waste, in which grew no living thing, the ground being covered with ashes, while the heavens were hidden by low-hanging clouds of sulphurous smoke, which rose ever through crevices in the ground.

All about her walked shadowy figures, cowed and gowned, so that she could not see their faces, trailing their black vestments behind them as they moved with bowed heads, like hopeless penitents.

They seemed to wring their hands, hidden in the sleeves of their sackcloth draperies; and one and all uttered the most dolorous cries and groans of heart-wrung anguish she had ever heard.

An oppressive burden seemed to cumber her breast, filling it with dull pain. It flashed across her mind that she was in the place of endless torment; and in a wild agony of terror she burst the bonds of sleep, and started upright.

She was still in darkness, and still those weird cries filled her ears. She strained her eyes to see the haunting figures; but they seemed to have been swallowed up in the rayless gloom, as if the black clouds had suddenly dropped to the earth, enveloping her in their impenetrable folds.

It was several seconds before she could sufficiently clear her mind to realize that she was sitting on a bed fully dressed, and that the sounds she heard came from below stairs.

But gradually she recalled where she was, and then she recognized the voice of her strange guardian.

He was pacing the floor below, and giving utterance to sounds as terrible as those she had heard in her dream.

Breathlessly the affrighted girl listened. She could not distinguish the words he spoke; but presently she made up her mind that he was praying, in such an agony of soul as she would not have dreamed it possible for a human being to endure.

He wailed, he sobbed, he groaned, he cried out in wild, inarticulate bursts of anguish.

But another voice blended with his. It was that of his wife. Its higher pitch carried the articulations more distinctly, where her husband's was muffled by the intervening floor.

Now she groaned in response to some fervid appeal of his:

"Amen, good Lord!"

Again it was:

"Take Thy curse from us, oh God!"

And yet again:

"Save our souls alive from the burning!"

These responses seemed to lash the feelings of the man to wilder fury. Then the woman seemed to plead with him and soothe him, until his cries sunk to moans, and finally into dead silence.

But now from some other part of the house—it seemed the room adjoining Edith's—came the sound of suppressed sobbing and low, tremulous crying.

It was so guarded as to indicate that the weeper was afraid of being heard.

It abruptly ceased at the sound of an opening door below, and an ascending tread on the stairs.

Filled with undefined terror, Edith crept under the bedclothes and covered her head, and so lay palpitating, breathless.

CHAPTER V.

THE HEATHEN CHINEE.

"GOOD morning, aunt Mercy! I am ashamed to present myself in this untidy condition; but I haven't been able even to smooth my hair, since I was too tired last night to think to get anything out of my trunk."

Without any means of making her toilet in

her room, Edith had been able only to straighten out her dress a little before coming downstairs.

She found Mrs. Swayne kneading an immense batch of bread in the kitchen.

"I am surprised that your trunks are so large, and that there should be more than one," said the woman, stiffly, almost sternly. "I know nothing of the life to which you have been accustomed; but here we are people who live in the fear of the Lord, and who use His bounties frugally. I shall be pained to learn that you are taken up with the vanities of this wicked world, and given to adorning the body, which in the end must molder in the grave, with fripperies not meet for a child of God."

Edith flushed scarlet, as she dropped her eyes, following the disapproving glance of her stern mentor over her person.

Her dress was a dainty affair, most becomingly cut and trimmed, with a knot of gay ribbon at the throat.

"I—I have plainer dresses than this," she stammered, yet with a dismayed consciousness that the simplest of her tasty little morning wraps could not by any possible alteration be made to look as hideously ugly as the straight calico gown Mrs. Swayne wore.

Mrs. Swayne passed that matter, and renewed her attack at another point.

"It is unseemly to have your hair flying about your shoulders like that," she said. "It will be more modest and more pleasing in the sight of heaven to wear it braided and wound in a simple knot, or confined in a net, if indeed it would not be removing a snare from your path to have it cut off."

At that Edith fairly gasped with dismay. In her fanatical hatred of beauty, could this hard old woman contemplate such a sacrilege as the sacrifice of her hair?

Her nostrils dilated, and her eyes grew large and dark, as, looking her hostess steadily in the eye, she said, in low, firm, yet thoroughly respectful tones:

"No, aunt Mercy! My papa loved to see my hair this way. I shall always wear it so, though I will try to please you in other things."

But what was there in her words to produce so startling an effect?

The woman's sallow face turned livid with sudden pallor. She shrunk back, lifting her hand as if to ward off a blow, and so sunk almost fainting into a chair.

"Aunt Mercy! What have I done?" cried Edith, springing forward with quick remorse.

But the woman waved her off, apparently unable to speak.

"Oh! what have I said?" urged the girl, appealingly, with clasped hands.

"Go! go!" gasped the woman. "You will find a basin and towel just outside the door."

"But you will forgive me?" petitioned the distressed girl, almost kneeling to her.

The woman stamped her foot, with that sudden passion which is born of unendurable pain, crying almost savagely:

"Obey me!"

And the affrighted girl, who had never before been treated with such violence, hurried tremulously from the room.

She found a tin wash-basin and a half-used bar of brown soap on a flat stump; flanked by a bucket of water; while a coarse roller towel hung on a peg against the slab wall of the house.

The towel was scrupulously clean, as was everything else she had seen in or about the house. She was therefore able to wash her face and hands with comfort, though she could not bring herself to thread her golden hair with the comb and brush that were supplied for general use.

On timidly re-entering the large kitchen—which, by the way, was the most home-like room in the house—she found Mrs. Swayne restored to her wonted stony self-possession.

But her appetite was pretty well frightened out of her, so that she partook of her breakfast of bread and milk sparingly enough to win the favor of an anchorite.

While she was thus employed, an elfish little girl—whose sobbing she had heard the night before—entered shyly. Her pale face was lighted by great dark, wonder-wide eyes, and framed in jet-black hair, the beauty of which could not be disguised by the sober way in which it was combed down over the temples.

"What a little old woman!" thought Edith, in wondering delight. "As old-fashioned as a little Puritan of two hundred years ago."

And she at once sought to win her confidence. But she found that, while her slightest request was obeyed with painful precision, she could win no natural response to her endear-

ments. The child submitted to her caresses, but with wondering bashfulness, as if she did not know what to make of it all.

Her growing uneasiness, and the frequent turning of her great dark eyes toward her mother, directed Edith's attention thither.

Mrs. Swayne proceeded with her work grimly. Was she displeased? Edith could not guess.

However, she took the little girl, who—she learned—was named Jerusha; out of doors, to look for Little Ah Sin.

Upon being asked if she had seen him, Jerusha replied that she had, adding:

"Is he your little brother?"

The idea set Edith off in a merry laugh.

Instead of joining her, the little girl looked at her in astonishment, as if laughter were a thing wholly unfamiliar to her.

They found Little Ah Sin warily on the lookout for Edith, but shrewdly taking in everything that went on about him. He did not seem very well pleased with his surroundings.

"Alla man catchee belly-ache!" was his laconic summary, in reply to Edith's inquiry.

But he took kindly to little Jerusha; and from the moment of their introduction they became fast friends.

That morning she took her first lesson in laughter, at some of his quaint antics; but the moment they returned to the house, she became again the sober-sided little Puritan that Edith had first seen.

So Edith Vernon's new, strange life began.

She found that all the people of the ranch sat together at meat, around a long table in the kitchen; and night and morning they were assembled to hear the reading of the Bible, and to kneel in prayer.

Abednego Swayne always chose those chapters in the scriptures which contained the darkest pictures of human sin and Divine vengeance; and his prayers were so terrible that the hardy herders turned pale and trembled.

They filled Edith with wondering horror. It seemed as if he lived under the shadow of some awful curse—as if his soul were wrung with a foretaste of the untold agonies of eternal damnation!

For all that, love was a necessity of her nature; and she sought to win her way to the clouded hearts of these unhappy people, to see if she could not shed some ray of brightness over them.

She found the woman utterly unapproachable. Those worldly dresses, that golden hair, and the bright, sunny happiness—with its gay song and rippling laughter—which she could not dampen, were thorns in the side of Mrs. Swayne.

But the "deacon" yielded somewhat to Edith's coaxing little ways. It got so that she went to him with the assurance that anything she asked would be granted. Once when she had drawn his arm about her and nestled her head on his shoulder, she was surprised by the fall of a tear on her cheek.

He put her away abruptly when he discovered what had happened; but she knew that her place in his heart was secure.

No longer afraid of him, she took her place near him at prayers, and when next he wrestled with the fiends of despair, she reached out her hand and placed it gently on his.

He seized it convulsively, and bending over it, burst into sobs, the stormy passion of his pleading for the aversion of the divine wrath giving place to broken expressions of confidence in and gratitude for God's mercy and forgiveness.

After that it became an understood thing that they were to kneel hand in hand; and while her hand was often wet with his tears, the savage harshness that had at first shocked and frightened her gradually grew milder.

In all things she softened him, save one. He treated Little Ah Sin with rigid justice; but he could not be brought to look upon him kindly. Whenever Edith pleaded the cause of her *protege*, he shook his head gloomily, and repeated what he had said in the beginning:

"A worshiper of Belial! An abomination in the sight of the Lord! A fire-brand in a household of God's servants!"

For his part, Little Ah Sin seemed to have none of this religious prejudice. He knelt with the rest at prayers, without protest. But while he sat listening to the reading, his bias-cut eyes wandering furtively from face to face, or while he bowed with only his ears on the alert, it was impossible to tell whether his devotions were offered to the true God, or to some hideous wooden image which he had left in his own country, represented possibly by an equally ugly amulet hidden beneath his clothes.

As has been said, he and little Jerusha became fast friends, and after a time it was noticed that they were frequently off alone together.

The fact first attracted Mrs. Swayne's attention, and she spoke to her husband about it.

"Are we doing our duty by the child in allowing her to come under the influence of this child of Satan?" she asked. "How do we know that he has not been sent by his master expressly to lure her feet to the path which leads to damnation?"

The man's brow darkened.

"Let us not be over-hasty," he said. "He is almost as much a child as Jerusha."

"Is that the reason of your indifference?" asked the woman, with a manner which savored somewhat of spitefulness; "or is it because he is the *protege* of your ward?"

"We have reason not to bring unnecessary unhappiness upon her," said the man, gloomily.

At that the woman fired up with sudden anger.

"And must we sacrifice all—even our children—for her?"

"We can at least first make sure that we have cause to interfere."

"The sooner we set about it, the less we may have to mourn."

"Let it be at once, then."

"Here is our opportunity. There they go now."

"We will follow them."

They acted upon this resolve, tracing the little folks with every precaution not to be discovered.

There was nothing sly in the behavior of the children—at least until they came to a secluded glen, a spot of wild beauty, filled with pine-shadowed and vine-draped crags.

Here Little Ah Sin turned round and peered back over the path they had come, as if to assure himself that they were not observed.

"Do you see?" cried the woman, with the glitter of hatred in her eyes.

The man put a restraining hand on her wrist; but did not reply in words.

The children then plunged into the glen.

Their elders followed them cautiously.

Presently they came upon Jerusha standing alone, in the attitude of waiting, before the face of a cliff.

While they watched, Little Ah Sin made his appearance carrying a pine-knot.

He proceeded to light it, and then he and Jerusha disappeared.

"The cave! the cave!" panted Mrs. Swayne. "The little monster is leading her into some snare of the Evil One! Have not caves ever been the gateways to hell?"

The excited woman would have rushed forward to the protection of her child; but again her husband's hand restrained her.

"And are all our prayers to go for nothing?" he demanded.

Yet his brow was densely clouded, and he strode forward with a sinking heart.

They followed the children into the cave, guided by the gleam of their torch.

They had scarcely disappeared, when forth from its mouth came a long-drawn, frantic shriek.

Then the hollow cavern reverberated with a roar of maniac rage, followed by snarlings more like that of a beast than of a human being.

Blent with it were cries of terror in a childish treble.

CHAPTER VI.

JOSS PIDGIN.

It was Mrs. Swayne's scream that first startled the slumbering echoes of the cavern.

What she saw was a figure of clay posed against the wall of the cave, on a slightly elevated ledge, illuminated by several torches stuck in crevices of the rock.

It was of rudest construction; yet there could be no doubt as to its character. It was a hideous representative of a Chinese Joss.

And there before it, in the attitude of Oriental worship, knelt two little devotees, with their foreheads to the ground!

Words cannot depict the emotions of the mother, at witnessing this—to her—unspeakable sacrilege.

"Oh!" she shrieked. "It is the Fiend himself, come in this lying shape to steal our child's soul!"

And frantically she rushed forward, to snatch the little one from the power of this almond-eyed Satan.

Startled by her mother's voice, Jerusha sprung to her feet in terror. She knew not in what awful delinquency she had been detected; but that it was something beyond all her childish offenses heretofore she needed no assurance, after one glance at the wild woman who swooped down upon her.

She stood in dumb dismay, awaiting annihilation.

She was snatched off her feet and run away with, her mother screaming into her ear:

"Oh, you wicked, wicked child! What will God do to you for so awful a sin? Tears of blood can never wash the black stains from your soul!"

"Mother! mother!" panted the little one, "we were praying!"

"Praying!" screamed the mother. "Praying to a graven image!—the work of human hands! No! no! the work of the Arch-Fiend himself!"

Then the child for the first time realized the enormity of her offense, and she clung in terror to even so hard a mother as that, fearing that the heavens would open, and the lightnings of Divine wrath blast her into nothingness.

The effect on Abednego Swayne was full as powerful as on his wife.

He saw the hand of Heaven in this awful calamity that had fallen upon his house. He saw himself and his children handed over to the power of the Demon. What form more terrible than this was it possible for the vengeance of the Most High to take?

His son, his eldest born, was a profligate. All prayers in his behalf had proved vain; all efforts to save him had failed, until his father had virtually abandoned the struggle, and handed him over to the devil.

And now must this child of his later years go too? And in this monstrous way! A worshiper of false gods! This was worse, far worse, than any or all crimes against humanity—worse than murder!

His horror-haunted imagination pictured her writhing in the nameless tortures of endless punishment. He saw the finger of a frowning God pointing at her, and heard a stern voice saying:

"The sins of the father are visited upon the children!"

With a yell of insane fury he sprang forward, and tearing the image from its ledge, dashed it to the floor of the cavern, shattering it to fragments.

Little Ah Sin was neither a stock nor a stone. He had human feelings as keen as those of any of us. To him his god was as dear and as reverend as was Abednego Swayne's to him. He experienced the same sense of sacrilege at seeing his Joss contemned and dethroned by the rude hand of the unbeliever.

With a cry of enraged protest, he sprang forward to defend the sacred image, drawing the creese-like knife with which he had menaced Jack Swayne in the stage-coach.

"Hi, yah!" he screamed. "That b'long what thing that Joss pidgin man he makee bobbory 'long that Joss? More better you no stlikee that Joss, s'pose you b'long one piece devil! That muchee good Joss, alla same likee that 'Melican man Joss!"

But with the stroke of a tiger Abednego Swayne clutched his wrist, wrenched the knife from his puny grasp, and hurled him against the wall of the cave with stunning force.

Then in the frenzy of his rage, he fairly danced upon the fragments of the unlucky image, grinding it to powder under his heel, while he snarled like an enraged beast.

But Little Ah Sin remained to be dealt with.

With all his fanaticism, Abednego Swayne did not literally believe that the little Celestial was the devil in person, having taken on this form; but he was thoroughly convinced that he was "possessed of the devil," and commissioned by him to destroy the soul of little Jerusha.

A century and a half ago he would undoubtedly have burnt him. As it was, the fashion of the age having somewhat changed, he resolved to "make it warm" for the demoniac tenant in a way that the law would not so strongly discountenance.

Seizing him by the arm, he dragged him forth from the cavern, following Mrs. Swayne, who was in the same summary manner hustling Jerusha homeward.

The mother took the child into the house and into her own room, where she forced her upon her knees.

"Do not dare to so much as move until I come back to you," she cried; "but improve your time by praying that your awful wickedness may be forgiven!"

The little one was speechless with terror. She would have pleaded with a less iron-hearted mother not to leave her alone with the God whom she had been taught to look upon as a frowning tyrant, whose chief occupation was exacting of those who offended him the severest penalties he could think of.

She could not pray coherently. She could only

kneel there, shrinking and shuddering with dread.

She dimly pictured to herself the Deity as some gigantic figure, in flowing robes of white, the glance of whose angry eye would kill her, like a stroke of lightning. Her notion of the devil was a little black imp, with bat-wings and forked tail, with hoofs, and horns just visible through his hair, and a wicked smile. It would have been a nice question to decide which being she feared most.

Meanwhile Mrs. Swayne had joined her husband out of doors.

"What is to be done?" she asked. "We must exorcise this demon!"

Abednego Swayne looked gloomily hopeless.

"Can a man escape out of the hand of the Almighty?" he asked.

Inwardly the woman shivered with dread. She, too, secretly felt that they were fighting a losing battle with their adverse fate. Yet with a sinking heart she still maintained the struggle.

"Shall we fold our hands and do nothing?" she cried.

"Of what avail whatever we do?" asked the man, despondently. "Whom God hath elected, he shall save his soul alive! Whom God hath reprobated, he shall be cast into the outer darkness! Shall sinful man presume to offer his rags of righteousness as a ransom?"

"But we can cast this horrible thing from us! We can have none of it!"

"Look!" he said, in reply.

He stood with the now thoroughly terrified Celestial a prisoner in one hand. He lifted the other, and showed his wife the knife he had taken from the culprit.

"Murder!" he said, with a bone-searching shudder.

The woman stared at the weapon as if it were a serpent that was charming her. Her teeth chattered. An icy sweat started from every pore, standing in great beads on her forehead and quivering lip.

"God spare us!" she gasped below her breath.

But to give up, to yield to the fate that both felt was inevitably in store for them—that was too horrible.

To go on, step by step, ever nearing the yawning gulf into which they were at last to plunge into the raging flames of everlasting torment, and yet to give over all efforts to arrest their fatal progress!

"No! no!" she fairly shrieked, flinging her hands above her head. "We cannot stop! We must fight on to the end! Surely, surely a merciful God will see that we are doing everything in our power to atone! What can we do more?"

"The past is beyond recall!" groaned the man.

"Not all who cry Lord! Lord!"

A sudden rage seized the woman.

"Burn him!" she screamed, clutching Little Ah Sin as if about to at once drag him to the stake. "Shall this little monster destroy our child too? At least we may have revenge!"

The man's head sunk lower on his breast. He shook with deeper despondency.

"Murder! Murder! Always murder!" he groaned.

With a cry of sharp anguish and terror, the woman snatched her hands away from contact with Little Ah Sin, and shrunk back, her knees knocking together with this new significance given to her act.

"Get the dinner-horn," requested her husband.

She staggered away into the house, with an abject meekness, as if she had been crushed.

Without releasing Little Ah Sin, but thrusting the creese into his own belt, Abednego Swayne blew a long blast upon the horn, and handed it back to his wife.

"Replace it, and follow me," he said.

Then he strode off toward the stables, dragging Little Ah Sin at his heels.

In response to the summons, all the men on the ranch came in, as was their wont.

They were called to the stables, where their master stood like a grim Nemesis.

He had stripped Little Ah Sin to the waist, and tied him by the wrists to a hitching-post.

In his hand he held a long black-snake whip.

Little Ah Sin was ghastly pale and trembling with dread. He looked piteously from face to face as the men arrived; but he made no verbal appeal.

To him they were all "Melican men." They held him a "heathen Chinee." He had nothing to hope from their tender mercies—so he felt.

But there was one whose sense of fair-play told him that for so many burly Christians to "sit down" on that one pitiful little heathen wasn't giving him "a fair show."

"What's the row with the kid?" he asked.

Little Ah Sin looked at him with a sudden brightening of hope and trust, as a dog might have wagged his tail, and made an effort to crawl to the feet of one merciful foe.

"I have been warming a viper in my bosom; and he has stung me!" replied Abednego Swayne.

"The which, boss?" asked the man, with a puzzled look. "I allow I don't drop to you, though maybe it's all right."

"I have all along looked with misgiving upon the introduction of the heathen into our country, favored with the knowledge of the true God. Let us by all means bear the light of the Gospel into their darkness, that they may not plead ignorance at the last judgment. But let us not poison our own homes with their baneful presence."

"The infernal cattle has no right hyar, an' that's a fact!" growled a sullen fellow.

"This one came into our midst against my will," proceeded Abednego Swayne. "I have permitted him to sit where he might have the example of our devotions, hoping to dislodge Satan from his benighted heart. But I have just detected him in not only himself practicing his devil-worship in secret, but teaching my child the abomination!"

The majority of the men, though they gave in only a word-of-mouth allegiance to their religion, not allowing it to have any perceptible effect on their lives, were ready enough to repel with persecution any invasion of it.

With his wonted fervor, Abednego Swayne summoned God to witness that he was striking in His defense, even as the Israelites of old smote the heathen.

Then the lash descended on Little Ah Sin's quivering back, calling forth a wild shriek of pain from his bloodless lips.

Carried away with the savage hate of the bigot, Mrs. Swayne, instead of feeling her womanly pity stirred, burst into a hymn of praise, as if to drown the cries of the victim.

Amid a rain of cruel blows, Abednego Swayne's voice rose above the shrieks of the writhing sufferer, calling to the devil to come forth, in the name of the Lord God.

But another shrill cry blent with Little Ah Sin's.

The men, who were viewing this cruel castigation with growing uneasiness, started at the sight of one who came on the wings of angelic pity and righteous indignation.

But in his mad fanaticism, Abednego Swayne was oblivious to any interruption, until a fluttering figure sped by him and sprung between his lash and the back it had scored with lines of blood.

Roused from her absorption in a book by the uproar without, Edith had flown to the succor of her *protege*, and thrown her arms about him, covering his back with her body, so that she received the last blow across her own shoulders.

CHAPTER VII.

A FATAL ACT.

In the exaltation of her holy mission, the girl herself was scarcely conscious of the fiery sting of the lash.

But from the men, who had witnessed Little Ah Sin's sufferings with little sympathy, it drew forth a howl of indignation.

The effect on Abednego Swayne was as powerful as any one could have wished.

The whip dropped from his hand. He shuddered. His rage gave place to profound despair.

"Again!" he muttered, below his breath. "It is hopeless! God's curse is upon me!"

"You monster!" gasped Edith, turning her flashing eyes upon him.

Her scorn goaded him to sullen ferocity. He frowned blackly, and steeled his heart against every sentiment of kindly humanity.

His wife, who, believing that she was doing God's service in setting her face against worldliness, had come to hate Edith, sprung to his side.

"How dare you—a mere child!—put yourself in the way of righteous judgment?" she cried.

Without heeding her, Edith turned to the gaping crowd.

"Are you men?" she demanded; "and can you yet stand and witness this outrage? You cowards! How many of you does it take to torture one helpless child?"

At that well-deserved rebuke more than one dropped his head in shame.

"You're right, miss!" cried he who had had a pulse of sympathy for the sufferer from the start. "They don't put the lash to him no more. I'll stand to that, if it takes a leg!"

And he came promptly forward, to make good his words, if necessary.

"Give me your knife," said Edith.

"Let me, ma'am."

"What! you who did not lift a finger in his defense—shall he owe his release to you?" Her eyes flashed with royal scorn.

The man dropped his head.

"Right ag'in, miss!" he said. "Your hand is the only one clean enough to cut them bonds."

And he presented his bowie with a native grace which showed that not all gentility is beneath broadcloth.

Edith's face brightened.

"I like you!" she said, frankly. "What is your name?"

"Jim Stebbins, ma'am, if it please you."

"Well, Jim Stebbins, I think you worthy to free Little Ah Sin, after all!"

"Do you, miss?" cried the fellow, with sudden delight.

"Of course I do. Haven't I said so?"

"Waal, miss, ef you say so, why, so it is! An' the galoot what lays a finger on the heathen after this has got to chaw Jim Stebbins, hide an' taller!"

With a few quick slashes he severed the ropes.

Released, Little Ah Sin caught Edith's hand, and dropping on his knees, pressed it to his quivering lips and tear-wet face.

He was too much overcome to attempt to put his gratitude into words.

The girl's heart swelled with renewed indignation.

"Can you look upon this spectacle without shame for your merciless barbarity?" she cried, turning the lightnings of her eyes again upon Abednego Swayne.

"With a woman's scant justice," he said, "you hasten to condemn without taking the trouble to find out the justification."

"With a woman's humanity," she retorted, "I know that nothing of which this little fellow is capable could justify such fiendish cruelty as this."

"Is it nothing," cried Mrs. Swayne, at a white heat of anger, "that he was destroyin' the soul of our child?"

Edith looked at the infuriate woman in astonishment.

"Hurt Jerusha?" she said. "Why, she has not a warmer friend in the world than Little Ah Sin!"

"So warm that he would have her join in his devil-worship!" shrieked the woman.

With increasing bewilderment Edith looked from her to her husband.

From him she turned to the men.

"While the boss was a-convertin' the heathen to his way o' thinkin'," said Jim Stebbins, "the leetle cuss—beggin' yer pardon, miss—but the leetle heathen was a-gittin' of his work in on the sly, makin' a heathen Chinese, so to speak, out o' the leetle gal—teachin' her to worship a god what he made out o' mud. I reckon he 'lowed what's sass fur the goose is sass fur the gander!"

Then Edith understood the situation, and looking at her guardian in pitying sorrow—no longer in anger—she said:

"And for this, the offense of a child who knew no better, you have inflicted so merciless a punishment! May God help you, and open your eyes to your terrible mistake!"

Without another word, she threw Little Ah Sin's tunic loosely over his naked shoulders, and said:

"Come!"

He got upon the side of her furthest from his persecutors, and clinging to her hand, was led to her room.

There she washed the blood from his wounds, and anointed them with a soothing unguent. Over this she bound a layer of raw cotton, to protect the smarting lacerations from harsh contact with his clothing.

As she could not go to the loft over the stables which he shared with the herders, she made him get into her own bed and established herself as his nurse.

He went to sleep holding her hand, and gazing into her face with a piteous gratitude that brought tears to her eyes.

Later, he moaned and tossed in fever. But that passed, and in a day or two he was about very much as before, except that he seemed as afraid of little Jerusha's company as she was of his, and whenever he was near Abednego Swayne he stood with downcast eyes, trembling.

"I tell ye what it is, boys," said one of the men to his comrades, "thar's no takin' the measure o' them heathens; an' it wouldn't surprise me ef that thar leetle cuss come back at

the boss some day ef he ever gits the chance to take him foul."

"Good fur him, I say, ef he kin git his work in," was the careless response.

"He ain't done with the old man yet—that's my guess. Do you mind the look he gives him?"

This became a theme of general discussion, and the men got to watching for some act of retaliation on the part of Little Ah Sin.

All the while Abednego Swayne became more and more gloomy.

Edith no longer held his hand at prayers, and with the loss of her soothing influence the clouds of fanaticism again closed in about his mind.

He had not returned Little Ah Sin's creese-like dagger; and the child dared not demand it.

So matters stood when one night Edith was away visiting some friends in a neighboring ranch. A dance was a part of the entertainment, and it was participated in by all of the men and maids of Abednego Swayne's place.

He, Mrs. Swayne, Jerusha and Little Ah Sin, had the premises to themselves.

That night ill fortune sent Jack Swayne home.

He could not have chosen a worse time. His father was plunged in profound gloom. The going of his dependents to that worldly amusement, a dance, was an abomination for which he felt that he would be in some measure held to account.

He sat in the rocking-chair, with the open Bible on his knees, staring into the fireplace.

Mrs. Swayne, who was as much exercised as he over the wickedness of her servants, sought relief to her feelings in work. She was employed in the kitchen.

Jerusha was in bed. She lay with her head under the bed clothes, trembling with dread lest Satan should appear and claim her soul for some unconscious sin of the day.

Little Ah Sin was in the stables, where he found brutes that returned his affection, and instead of tormenting him, treated him "alla same likee 'Melican man."

Jack entered the presence of his father with a swagger.

The fact was, that, feeling somewhat dubious about the outcome of this meeting, he had "braced up" for the occasion.

As in such cases often happens, he had overdone the matter. He had "toned his nerve" until he did not know the difference between insolence and self-possession.

"Well, gov'nor! how's how?" was his careless salutation.

Abednego Swayne closed the Bible and put it on the table at his elbow.

Then he turned and looked at his son sternly. "You?" he asked, in his deep, hollow voice.

Jack laughed in a way that blended uneasiness with insolence, and looking down at his clothes, said:

"Don't it look like me? I fancy these togs are rather becoming. Got 'em at a bargain."

"The Prodigal Son did not return in boastful vainglory, but in humility and contrition of heart."

"Oh, but," said Jack, "I ain't such a muff, you know."

"A what?" asked his father, slowly, his eyes glowing with dull fire.

Jack shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

"The times change and men change with them. A man who can't keep out of a hog-wallow, as a finish to a little racket, is no man at all. The trouble with you, my dear sir, is that you are a little matter of three or four thousand years behind the age!"

"For which God be thanked!" aspirated Abednego Swayne, unctuously.

"H'm!" said Jack, "that's a matter of taste. For my part, I prefer to be a little more modern."

"I believe that that is the preference of all whose feet lay hold on hell!"

"Oh, come, now! No hard names! I haven't a doubt, from all accounts, that the devil is a right jolly good fellow, who believes in having his fling. He's never bilious, like some people I might mention. He seems to take a rather cheerful view of life. Come, come, old man! brace up! This world ain't half so bad a place as you think it."

Abednego Swayne rose slowly to his feet. His eyes blazed; every nerve was tense; he was ghastly with the pallor of intense wrath.

"So!" he said, in a harsh, rasping voice, "you have come to think the devil a right jolly fellow, have you?—a boon companion? You have reach-

ed that point of Divine abandonment when you revel in your worship of the powers of darkness?"

"The ole man's got the maggots worse'n ever!" reflected Jack, struggling with a hiccup. "What in Cain did I come here for, anyway? Hang me if I don't forget! Oh! money—that's it! But I can't strike him when his liver is so out of order as it is to-day."

While these thoughts were passing through his mind Jack didn't know that he was staring at his father with the vacant stupidity of a drunkard; yet such was the fact.

"An undutiful son, a wine-bibber, a spend-thrift, a debauchee, a robber, with murder only a question of time and exigency, and now a wanton blasphemer of the most horrible type! Sir, your abandoned career must be cut short, and the opportunity to still further blacken your immortal soul be denied you in mercy. You shall have time for repentance, to save your soul alive—time from which the bullet of some of your victims might cut you off, if you were left to pursue your reckless course."

Jack had roused his father's anger many a time; but he had never seen him in so terrible earnest as now.

He strode toward the outer door, muttering: "It is my last effort to save him. What is the welfare of the body compared with the salvation of the soul? God, I pray thee, sanctify my act, even as when Jacob would have sacrificed his son!"

He threw into place a bar that secured the door, and then faced about.

His manner had partly sobered Jack. His actions looked like a menace—but of what?

"What's the meaning of that?" he asked, uneasily. "What do you propose to do now?"

"To arrest you for highway robbery, and to hang you too!" replied his father.

The iron positiveness of his tones left no chance for doubt as to his resolve to make his words good.

Jack, who knew him well, was thrown into a state of consternation.

"Highway robbery?" he gasped.

"For the numerous stoppages of the coach which have supplied the means of your reckless dissipation, and which have at the same time wrought an outraged community to a point where it will justly hang you out of hand!"

It was true that pulling up the coach had become so frequent an occurrence that a Vigilance Committee was being seriously talked of.

"But, my God!" cried Jack, "I have not done this!"

Which was true enough, if the fact could be established.

But his father replied with implacable bitterness:

"Nor are you guilty of the truly filial proceeding of robbing your own father!"

Then Jack saw the trap into which his "lark" had betrayed him.

Guilty in one case, guilty in all! That was the only kind of logic an excited mob would listen to. And with the countenance, under the very accusation of his father, they would not dream of sparing him.

That his stern father would prove his most implacable accuser, he had not the least doubt.

As a flash of lightning reveals a darkened landscape with startling vividness, so the full horror of his situation burst upon him.

He saw the surging mob, with their passion-distorted faces, and the dangling noose. He felt the agonizing wrench, and heard the death-rattle. All of light and life would be blotted out in an instant; and then what?

As far back as he could remember his imagination had been haunted by the infernal horrors conjured up by his father in the semi-madness of his devotions.

As a child, he had quaked as Jerusha was doing now. Growing older, the reaction had come, when he saw how differently other people regarded such matters; until, with his throwing off of home restraints and plunging into dissipation, he had learned to scoff. But the impression so deeply stamped in childhood could not be effaced entirely; and in this moment, when he stood face to face with death, all the old horror returned upon him.

He knew his father's iron strength of muscle. If he got hold of him, there would be no shaking him off.

"Stop! stop!" he almost shrieked. "Would you give me over to death?"

"I will save your soul alive, if it is not too late!" was the unmoved reply.

Then the rage of despair seized him.

"I will not be sacrificed to your stupid fanaticism!" he cried.

His father sprung toward him.

His eye fell upon Little Ah Sin's creese-like knife lying on the table.

Ever since he had got possession of it, Abednego Swayne had held this before him in his private devotions, as a sort of penance. As the symbol of murder, he had used it as a means of abasing himself to the lowest depths of humiliation.

In the frenzy of his terror, with one thought of self-preservation, the son now snatched it up and plunged it into his father's breast.

With a shriek of horror more awful than a mere death-blow could have drawn from him, the wretched man sprung back, stared at his son an instant as if turned to stone, and fell straight over backward.

At work, as we have said, in the kitchen, Mrs. Swayne was attracted by the raised voices of father and son.

She opened the door just in time to see the blow.

Jack stood dazed by what he had done. He had not meant to kill his father. His only thought had been to escape him.

However, he stood there a murderer, ghastly white with the horror of it, and quivering in every nerve.

His mother's shriek attracted his attention to the door in which she stood.

He saw that his act had had a witness. She would denounce him on a charge even more terrible than that which his father could have brought.

A sudden wild panic seized him.

The air about his head seemed full of voices crying:

"Fly! fly! fly!"

With a bound he reached the door, tore the bar from its place, and leaped out into the darkness—that darkness which could never hide from the eye of recollection his father's last stare of horrified reproach.

His horse stood where he had left it, quietly scratching its leg by rubbing its muzzle against it.

Was it possible that all nature did not know of his crime? The thought flashed through his mind as a strange circumstance.

But as he essayed to spring into the saddle, he saw that he still gripped the murderous knife.

He thought that he heard a laugh close to his ear. He believed it was the devil jeering him—chuckling over his success in having steeped his soul in blood—in the blood of his own father!

With a shudder he cast it from him.

Then into the saddle and away. His horse's wildest speed was not fast enough for him. He seemed to be pursued by a legion of fiends.

Back in the house his mother had uttered a low moan, essayed to reach her husband, but fallen upon her face in a swoon at the first step.

CHAPTER VIII.

READING THE SIGNS.

EDITH had gone to the dance under the protection of Jim Stebbins.

She had taken a great fancy to him, and his sterling qualities showed themselves with every opportunity.

He recognized the difference which her higher cultivation made between her and the people among whom she had come, and treated her like a young princess.

This country dance was a novelty to Edith. It was altogether free and easy, and sometimes bordered on roughness in its abandonment to fun; yet they were good, honest folk, and the worst feature was that the men made rather free with the bottle and tap.

They went early, and it was understood that Edith was to be returned home by midnight.

She enjoyed herself thoroughly, managing with such tact as not to excite the jealousy of the girls whom she far outshone; and when the time for going came, she was surprised to find that all of the people of the ranch had arranged to return with her, though it was more their wont to be caught by the waking dawn of a new day.

They formed a gay procession, the men carrying torches—an unusual demonstration in honor of Edith, who, by her spirited defense of Little Ah Sin, had become quite a heroine.

The girls were mounted behind their escorts, after the Mexican fashion; but Jim Stebbins had had the delicacy to furnish Edith with a separate horse.

So they rode up to the ranch, where all was wrapped in silence.

"But they have left a light in the window for

us," said Edith, since it was unlikely that the habit of early retirement was broken through by people so precise in everything as Abednego Swayne and his wife.

Neither the joyful barking of the dogs nor the tramping of the horses woke any response from the apparently sleeping house.

As for the revelers, they lowered their voices and made as little noise as possible, as if in approaching the house they passed into the shadow that overhung their employers.

"Even the little heathen sticks to his roost!" said one of the men, surprised that the natural curiosity of childhood did not call Little Ah Sin out to receive them.

"The old man would pick the wax out of his ears with a rake-stale," said another, "if Lady Edith didn't stand by him like a brick wall."

"She's a match for old Blue-nose, and don't you forget it!"

"Ain't she though?—when even the madam takes water when she makes a declaration of war."

"But all in the most lady-like shape, ye onderstand."

"You bet!"

They drew up before the house in a confused mass. The men leaped from their horses, and helped down each his lass.

If there was a sly squeeze here, a stolen kiss there, and a whispered word of endearment yonder, no one seemed put out by it.

The girls giggled, and one or two slapped their escorts a ringing box on the ear that made their eyes water, all in the best of humor.

The same performance would be gone through with over and over again, at least until marriage introduced them to the serious business of life.

There were not enough of womankind at the ranch to go round; so those fellows who were lucky enough to have some one to box their ears were not disposed to find fault if the love-taps were a little severe. There were plenty who would gladly have changed places with them! They—the forlorn—looked enviously on, smiling, but not with the fullest enjoyment.

However, they could all pay their homage to Edith. Jim Stebbins's exclusive claim to her extended no further than the privilege of riding at her side and handing her from her saddle.

He was a lucky man who anticipated his fellows in opening the door for her.

Instead of looking into the room, he was so much absorbed in his gallantry that he kept his eyes upon her, not to lose her amused smile of acknowledgment.

The pronounced devotion of these men, withal too honest to be otherwise than pleasing, was great fun to Edith.

By some little turn of attention she would make them blush like girls, when she would laugh at them, to their delight as well as confusion. But they never mistook her gayety. With it all was that nameless grace of good-breeding which marks the lady, and not one of them dreamed of the slightest presumption or familiarity. Indeed, had one relaxed a scintilla of the deference which all felt was her due, he would have been run off the place by all the rest, with more aches than whole bones!

It thus happened that, as she stepped upon the threshold, she turned her back toward the room, facing her bowing knights.

At in hand, they stood in a semicircle, within which Jim Stebbins claimed a place.

Her eyes twinkled merrily, and her laughing lips disclosed her pretty teeth, as she thanked them and bade them good-night.

"Good-night, and pleasant dreams to you," said Jim.

Then he had the generosity to add:

"The boys would all back that with a cheer if it wasn't for rousin' the house."

"You bet your life we would," spoke up one, with enthusiasm.

The others contented themselves with a murmur of indorsement.

She bowed them her final thanks, and then turned, to have her cheeks and lips suddenly blanched with fear.

In the act of turning toward the couples who were having out the fag-end of their flirtation in rather loud whispers and no end of giggling, Jim was arrested by her startled cry.

Instantly he turned and sprung across the threshold to her side.

He was followed by the others in a confused huddle, their faces suddenly sobered, and their eyes alert with serious curiosity.

They found Edith already kneeling beside Mrs. Swayne's prostrate form.

"Oh! what has happened?" she cried, in dismay. "Is she dead, or is it only a swoon?"

"Let me pick her up, ma'am," said Jim Stebbins, kneeling beside Edith.

"Gently! gently!" said the girl, sobbing with nervous excitement.

"Don't take on," said Jim, soothingly. "I reckon it ain't nothin' serious. I've seen my mother took this way."

He gathered the woman up in his strong arms without apparent effort, as tenderly as if she had been his sweetheart.

Even in that moment Edith felt that here was a true gentleman.

If his speech was not the most elegant, his feelings were fine. He had a true respect for womanhood.

"This way," she said, leading toward Mrs. Swayne's room.

It was unoccupied.

"Where can Mr. Swayne be?" she asked, as Jim was placing his burden on the bed.

She was answered by a cry from the other room.

One of the men shouted excitedly:

"Good God! what's this?"

Then came shrill screams from the women.

"It is blood—a pool of blood!" cried one of them.

"Oh! merciful Father! they've been murdering each other! I always said they'd come to it, sooner or later."

"Take me out!" gasped one, as if on the point of fainting.

Edith started up from bending over Mrs. Swayne with efforts to resuscitate her. She was as pale as a lily. Her eyes grew dark with an awful dread.

In the midst of the Babel there was a patter of feet, and a whimpering voice called:

"Edie! Edie!"

It was little Jerusha.

Since the tragedy which had filled the house with terrifying sounds, she had lain quaking with her head under the bed-clothes not daring to call to her parents for assurance that all was right.

Edith ran to meet her half-way down the stairs, and putting her arms about her, led her back to bed.

She had quickly passed her handkerchief over her face to brush away her frightened tears; but she could not calm the quivering of her nerves, nor relieve the ghastly pallor of her face at will.

"What is the matter?" asked the child, not blinded to her agitation by her brave effort to appear calm.

"I can't tell you now, dear," she replied. "But stay here in bed, like a good little girl, until I come back to you."

So habituated was the child to unquestioning obedience, that she lay still, only listening with all her ears, struggling to suppress her sobs of fear.

Edith returned to the "best room."

There she was horrified to find a pool of dark blood, and close beside it the impress of a bloody hand.

She turned sick and faint, but with a heroic effort collected her faculties.

Whatever had happened, it was a time for action, not weakness; and with less finely tempered natures giving way all about her—the men in confusion and the woman in hysterics—she proved her metal.

Jim Stebbins had already assumed supervision of the work that devolved upon the men.

"Come! brace up, boys!" he said. "Light up them torches again. We can't do anything without seeing what we're about."

The torches, which had been thrown into a heap, were hastily relighted, and the search for clues to the tragedy began.

"Thar's the heathen," suggested one. "He ought to know somethin' about this hyar business."

"That's so. But look sharp! You don't want to take these blazin' things to the stables. Rout him up in the dark, an' git a lantern."

Several went, but they called Little Ah Sin in vain.

"He ain't thar, pard," was the report made to Jim Stebbins. "They've gobbled him up, too, whoever they be."

"That's queer," said Jim, puzzled. "They didn't touch little 'Rusha."

"No more they did. I say, Jim!"

The speaker suddenly put on a mysterious expression, as if a startling thought had just occurred to him.

"Waal?" asked Stebbins.

The other drew him aside, and said, in a low tone, so that the rest might not hear:

"I don't want to stamp onto nobody what's already under foot, ef so be he's all right. But

this hyar's a queer go, one way o' lookin' at it, eh?"

"What way o' lookin' at it?" asked Jim.

"Why, the heathen, ye know."

"Waal, what about him?"

"Suppose he's seen his chance to come back at the ole man, an' boosted him up to glory?"

Jim Stebbins started. The suggestion was possible, if not probable.

But he at once associated Little Ah Sin with Edith. Besides, he had promised to stand by him. So he repelled the insinuation.

"Go put yer head to soak! What! he? You might as well ask if leetle 'Rusha hadn't had a hand in it!"

"Not quite, pard. The gal hain't his sleight with a toad-sticker. An' maybe you're furgittin' the yarn about his standin' off the road-agent. I tell ye, thar's more o' the devil in his yaller skin than you give him credit fur."

"Why, hang it all! the old man would break him in two!"

"Ef he didn't git him foul—maybe so. An' what do you say ef the deacon tried to whale some more religion into him while Lady Edith was out o' the way?"

"You keep yer mouth shut!" said Jim, with a brooding frown. "We'll find some evidence ag'in' the kid before we open on him, ef you please."

And he walked back toward the house.

But the herder did the very reverse of keeping his mouth shut. He had an idea, and the more he thought of it the more likely it seemed to him that it was the true solution of the situation.

He resolved to secure the credit of it by publishing it before it occurred to some one else.

The first hint was like a spark in dry prairie grass.

Everybody accepted it at once with conviction.

Meanwhile Edith had the women flying about, getting vinegar and brown paper, and other remedies, to resuscitate Mrs. Swayne.

"Has the misses come to?" asked Jim, anxiously. "One word from her may save a heap of time."

"Not yet," replied Edith. "She has received a terrible shock."

"Maybe leetle 'Rusha can tell us somethin'!"

"I am sure that she knows nothing. Whatever happened, she must have been afraid to come down until she heard us."

"Thar's nothin' fur it but a blind hunt, then. Ef the misses comes round, send us word."

And he went out again.

He was met by a confused group of men hurrying forward, one of them having something which all were trying to get a look at, and all talking at once.

"What's the row?" he demanded.

"What do you make o' this hyar, Cap?"

And a bloody knife was handed to him.

It was clearly distinguishable from the straight-bladed bowies in common use.

"Nobody but the Pagan carries such a rib-tickler as that," said one of the men.

"Whar did you find it?" asked Jim.

"Over yon, in the dirt, whar he throwed it."

"Hold on!" persisted Jim. "You don't know that he throwed it."

"Waal, that thar ain't all. Maybe you won't stand out so stout fur 'im after you've seen the rest."

"What rest?"

"Come an' look fur yerself, an' see what you make of it."

With nods of the head and denunciatory mutterings, the crowd showed their conviction that appearances told against Little Ah Sin.

"We've cut it all up, jest about the door, with our hosses' hoofs," said the accuser. "But ye kin make it out clean up to the sill, when ye know what to look fur. Come this hyar way; an' we'll trail it back."

Jim Stebbins was led to where there were traces of some heavy body having been dragged over the ground, its passage being clearly marked in the dust of the horseway. Without difficulty this could be followed back to the threshold.

"Waal?" asked the man who had already put his own interpretation on this appearance.

"It does look as if somebody had been dragged over hyar," admitted Jim. "Let's follow it up. That's the only way to make anything out of it."

"That's the last of the old man! Ye hyear me?"

This was spoken with so deep conviction that the men shuddered.

"What's become of him?" asked one of them, to draw out the answer that all anticipated.

"You trail that home, an' see," was the evasive reply.

No one pressed the speaker further; they guessed his meaning.

"Look sharp, boys," suggested one. "We may find somethin' by the way."

So, holding their torches close to the ground, they followed the trail, on the alert for significant signs.

"Thar you have it," cried one. "Blood!"

"An' hyar's more o' the same."

"That's whar he stopped to rest."

"Thin as he was, the old man was some of a load fur a boy to tote, ye onderstand?"

All accepted this explanation of the signs.

It was confirmed a moment later.

"Eh! What's this hyar? Don't tramp it out! What more do ye want than that, I'd like to know?"

"The Pagan's spoor, by Judas!"

It was undoubtedly an imprint of Little Ah Sin's junk shoe.

"Do you mind, boys?" cried an observant one.

"Hyar's more, an' half rubbed out. That means that he was draggin' the body after him."

A deep groan of rage went from lip to lip.

These discoveries were made only on the most favorable ground. As the way became more and more rocky, it was more difficult to find traces. But all guessed whither it was leading; so they passed rapidly over spots where no signs were visible, and picked up the trail again further on.

So they came to the verge of a gorge in the bottom of which ran a rapid mountain torrent.

"Thar's whar he dumped him!" said Little Ah Sin's accuser.

"In the Devil's Stirabout!" said another, with a shudder.

At the point where they stood the bank of the run was precipitous. The waters ran chill and black twenty feet below.

Stooping and holding their torches close, the men examined the rocks.

"Set yer peepers on that thar!" said one, in a low, hoarse voice.

It was a dark blur on the rock.

The men shuddered and drew back.

In silence they moved further down the run, soon reaching a point where it ended abruptly, the water sucking down into the ground in a whirlpool.

A few minutes they looked at it gloomily. The sullen swirl had no tale to tell intelligible to human ears.

In silence they returned to the house.

"Has the misses come round?" asked Jim again.

"Yes," said Edith—"at last."

"An' what does she say?"

"I can't get an answer out of her. She is in a terrible state. She only lies and moans, and keeps crying out the most awful prayers!"

The girl shuddered with the recollection of the scene she had just passed through.

"It won't matter," said Jim. "We don't need nothin' out o' her."

"What have you discovered?" asked Edith, breathlessly.

"That the boss is done fur, fur good an' all."

"You have found the—the—"

"Body? No. Nobody will ever see any more o' that. It's gone down the Devil's Stirabout!"

"Oh, no! no!"

"I wish it wasn't."

"And Little Ah Sin?"

"Thar's a loud call fur him. I hope the boys don't git him."

"That they *won't* get him?" repeated Edith, her eyes opening with surprise; for she had as yet heard nothing of the suspicion against her *protege*.

Supposing that Little Ah Sin had been made away with in like manner as her guardian, it seemed to her that Jim was expressing the wish that he would not be rescued.

"Surely," she added, with a pained look of reproach, "you are not so prejudiced against him as to wish him to come to harm?"

"I, ma'am?" cried honest Jim, puzzled to find himself so misunderstood. "I'm wishin' him luck, little as he deserves it."

"I—I don't—think—I understand you," said Edith, hesitatingly.

Jim flushed to the temples, thinking that she was inquiring as to his motive for befriending Little Ah Sin.

"It's along o' your havin' a soft side fur him, ma'am, ye onderstand," he explained.

"And for that reason you hope that he will not be rescued?"

"Rescued, ma'am? I'm hopin' he won't git ketched."

"Why, don't you suppose that he has already been caught, as you say?"

"I reckon not; or the boys would set up a yell over him."

"We seem to be hopelessly at cross-purposes somehow," said Edith, to whom everything that Jim said sounded contradictory. "What do you imagine has become of the boy?"

"I allow he's cut his lucky. He's as sly as a 'possum; an' maybe he'll git cl'ar off. It ain't very likely, though. He's too easy to spot."

Edith was in despair. All of this was more and more unintelligible.

"I hope that you, at least, will make some effort to find him," she said. "If the men are so malicious as to refuse to aid you, you may promise them any reasonable reward from me. After saving him from the hoodlums of San Francisco, I don't want to fetch him to greater harm."

"But, ma'am," cried Jim, scratching his head in bewilderment, "ef they clap onto him, they'll string him up out of hand!"

"Hang him? What for?"

"Fur saltin' the boss."

"For what?"

"Fur killin' Mr. Swayne."

"Oh, monstrous!" cried the girl, aghast. "Who has carried his prejudice to the extent of bringing so absurd a charge? Why, he is only a child."

"He's had a bad eye on the boss ever sence he larruped him—ef you'll let me say so, ma'am."

But before he could explain the evidence against Little Ah Sin, a great hubbub rose at the stables.

The savage intonation showed that the men were in a rage.

"Come!" cried Edith, catching hold of Jim's arm. "He must be saved from their ruthless persecution."

And she ran out of the house at the top of her speed.

CHAPTER IX.

"IN A FIX."

LITTLE AH SIN had a boy's natural desire to be at the "doin's," but Edith had thought that in so rollicking an assemblage it would be impossible to protect him from persecution; and he had yielded to her judgment with Oriental docility.

However, his curiosity was agog; and he waited for the first sound that would indicate the return of the revelers.

Hearing Jack Swayne ride up, he peered forth from his place in the stables, not caring to go out and run the risk of being caught prying by the stern master of the ranch.

The horrified cry of Abednego Swayne, followed by his wife's scream, and the headlong exit of the scapegrace son, goaded Little Ah Sin to a frenzy of excitement.

"Hi! that some man makee bobbery 'long that house!" he cried. "S'pose one teem catchee killum!"

And with the fear of at least an attempt at robbery followed by violence of some sort, he slipped out of the stables and crept toward the house.

Not a sound came forth. It was possible that the intruder had left every one dead behind him.

The door stood wide open. On the alert to spring to cover at the slightest sound, Little Ah Sin made a wide *detour* to get where he could see within from a distance, without getting in the bar of light that streamed out into the night.

He discovered the figure of Mrs. Swayne lying prone on the floor; but her husband lay in the corner, out of his range of vision.

"Hi! that what thing catchee that mississee?" he cried.

And his fear for her overcoming his dread of her husband, he made his way toward the house, yet cautiously, so that he could escape if the man who had used him so cruelly proved to be astir.

He reached the door and peeped in, without any sign of Abednego Swayne.

With an ejaculation of anxiety he stepped across the threshold, when a moan from close at hand thrilled him like an electric shock.

He turned quickly, and saw the master of the ranch sitting with his back against the wall, staring at him with a wild, haggard look that made him more terrible than ever before.

Little Ah Sin's jaw dropped. He could not stir a step to save his life.

Abednego Swayne had not lost consciousness. It was the horror of the attempt on his life by his own son that had unnerved him.

The shock left him dazed, like a groggy pugilist.

"Come here!" he commanded, in his most sepulchral voice.

As one under the sway of a mesmerist, Little Ah Sin advanced step by step.

He saw the blood, the death-like pallor. They were as terrible to him as to any child. They invested the wounded man with something of that horror which superstition attaches to the dead and to supposed supernatural beings.

The little Celestial conceived of him as a ghoul who sat there waiting to clutch him, and to fold him in an embrace which would smear him with blood!

Step by step he drew near, quaking from head to foot, half dead with fear.

But Abednego Swayne meditated no harm to him.

"Help me up," he said, in a decidedly practical way, extending his hand.

But to the terrified little Celestial the words were scarcely intelligible. He stopped and stared.

The man had to catch hold of him, and drag himself to his feet.

A moment he stood dizzily, clinging to his quaking support. Then he opened his coat and shirt, and examined his wound. He felt it and moved his body about, his face showing that the last was not without pain.

But whatever the precise character of his wound, he concluded that it was not mortal.

"The hand of Heaven interposed once more!" he muttered. "A long-suffering God vouchsafes to him yet another hour of grace. I thank Thee, oh Father!"

He looked at his wife, yet with no outward appearance of tenderness or anxiety.

"The curse will never lift from her while we two abide under the same roof," he muttered, abstractedly. "If I could but make acceptable atonement alone, the scourge might fall upon her less heavily."

He stood for some time in deep thought. Presently he roused.

"It must be done at once, if at all," he said. "God bless my effort, and accept it!"

To Little Ah Sin he then said:

"Go to the stables and get a sack of oats. Fetch it on your shoulders. Do you hear? Do not set it on the ground once between there and here."

Little Ah Sin obeyed wonderingly.

Abednego Swayne took a last look about on the scene of his domestic associations, and then said:

"Come!"

He made Little Ah Sin follow, dragging the sack after him. This of course obliterated their footsteps, except where here and there Little Ah Sin stepped aside from the track.

Reaching the mountain run, the sack was thrown into the whirlpool.

Little Ah Sin looked on in wonder. He could not guess the purpose of so odd a proceeding.

"Kneel!" commanded his stern master.

And he forced the trembling lad upon his knees.

"Swear that you will never tell to living man what has been done here—that you will not let it be known that *you* know anything about what has become of me!"

"No makee talkee!" gasped Little Ah Sin.

Seizing him by both shoulders, Abednego Swayne bent down so as to bring his face close to that of his quaking little victim.

"If you do," he said, in slow, fierce tones, "look out for me! I know how to punish a traitor!"

"No makee talkee!" again quavered Little Ah Sin.

"Go back to the stables; and when the people return, let them find you in bed and asleep. Go!"

It did not occur to Abednego Swayne that he was commanding duplicity—that to secure his ends through the deception of another was the same in principle as lying himself.

As for Little Ah Sin, he was glad to get off on any terms.

However, his curiosity was so keen as to overcome his fear, once he was free of his master's clutch.

He reflected that he had plenty of time to get back to the stables before the dancers returned; and in the darkness he could spy upon the gloomy fanatic, and find out what really became of him, with little danger of detection.

With the subtlety of an Indian, therefore, he no sooner got out of the sight and hearing of the other than he doubled upon his track and returned to where he could watch his further proceedings.

Once alone, Abednego Swayne turned his thoughts inward, and from that moment forgot Little Ah Sin's very existence.

He fell upon his knees on the verge of the precipice, and lifting his face and stretching his hands toward heaven, cried:

"Look down upon me, the vilest of sinners, oh, God! and from thine abode of light cast one ray of hope across my darkness! Here I dedicate what remains of my miserable existence to penitence without ceasing! Not my rags of righteousness, oh, Lord! but accept thou my sorrows, my despair!"

He rose, and with his eyes on the ground made his way up the gorge, going almost directly away from his home.

The rocky character of the way would enable him to go for miles, if he wished, without leaving a sign by which he could be traced.

He was bareheaded, and without a morsel of food or the means of procuring any, and so went out into the wilderness to do penance, like a hermit of the Middle Ages.

Little Ah Sin crept after him for a long distance, until assured he was going into the very heart of the mountains, and then hastened back, that he might be in his place when the master was missed.

But the unexpectedly early return of the revelers was fatal to his purpose.

He heard them even before he got in sight of the house; and run as he might, they had arrived and the stable-yard was flooded with the light of their torches before he could slip into security.

When the torches were thrown down and extinguished, he hoped to run the gantlet in safety; but, alas! some of the unlucky fellows, who found no pleasure in watching coquetry in which they themselves had no share, went directly to the stables, where they would inevitably have detected him endeavoring to enter.

He waited for some lucky chance in his favor, in momentary expectation of the commotion which would announce the discovery of signs of violence in the house.

His one hope now was that those at the stables would run to the house to see what was the matter, and thus give him his opportunity.

That he might slip out of his clothes and into bed without an instant's delay, he loosened everything.

Once between the blankets, he would look at his inquisitors with such bland innocence that the most skeptical would believe that he had been sound asleep since sundown!

But the chance was not afforded him until the searchers went to the whirlpool, following the trail of the dragged sack.

Then he whisked into the stables and into bed like a shadow.

But, alas! it was now too late. In the excitement and anxiety of his sore strait, it did not occur to him that he had probably been looked for. He was not old enough to be able to weigh all the chances of a situation.

So, returning from the whirlpool, the men found him where they had looked for him in vain not twenty minutes before.

"By the livin' Jingo!" cried the fellow who first discovered him.

"What's the row?" asked another.

"Come hyar an' see! Blow me tight ef this hyar don't beat the old feller himself!"

Their curiosity thus piqued, several ran to the spot.

There lay Little Ah Sin, to all outward appearances sleeping as sweetly as any baby!

The men held the lanterns above their heads and stared at him.

Not an eyelid quivered!

"Waal, I sw'ar!" muttered one of them.

"Ain't he a beauty?" asked another.

"He's slid in hyar sence we war hyar after him."

"You bet!"

"An' he's playin' 'possum on us now."

"He ain't doin' nothin' else!"

"He's a good one, I'll swear!"

"Ain't he?"

The speaker lowered his lantern close to Little Ah Sin's face.

The boy moved uneasily, as a disturbed sleeper; caught his breath, and sneezed; and thereupon his eyes flew wide open, as if he had been roused by the violence of the paroxysm.

In the most natural manner imaginable he started up to a sitting posture, batting his eyes as if they were dazzled by the light, and throwing up his hands as if to ward off one of those playful assaults with which he had been wakened not infrequently before.

"Hi yah! that b'long what thing you makee 'long mi? More better you makee sleepee 'long

you own self. That China boy no makee bobby 'long you."

"The leetle cuss!" cried one of the men, carried away with admiration of this consummate acting.

Little Ah Sin looked from one face to the other in a most unconscious way, only repeating:

"You no touchee mi!"

"He's got the cheek of a goverment mule!"

"That ain't all he's got. Jest look at his hand."

Little Ah Sin glanced down with the rest, and his heart leaped as if it would jump from his mouth.

"Blood!" cried one of the men, aghast.

"What do you expect?" asked another. "Ef he tapped the old man, wasn't that what he'd be likely to find inside of him?"

With a low cry of dismay, Little Ah Sin did a most natural thing, and yet one which seemed to confirm his guilt.

He quickly thrust his hand out of sight under the blanket, which he had huddled up about him as he sat.

"Cave!" cried one of the men, reaching out and clutching him by the shoulder. "We've got you, John?"

With a chattering cry of protest, Little Ah Sin began to squirm, protesting his innocence wildly, but in such a jumble of higgly-piggly English that scarcely a word was intelligible.

However, he was in a remorseless grip. The man who had him offered no needless injury; but he would hang him without a throb of pity.

"Look!" cried another, catching up the boy's clothes. "Hyar's more blood!"

A howl of rage greeted this revelation.

Little Ah Sin looked with chattering teeth.

"Fetch him along!" cried one of the men, starting out of the stables with the besmirched clothes, to show them.

"Hold on!" cried another. "Put his duds on to him."

Little Ah Sin was huddled into some of his garments, but with such dispatch that they were for the most part hind-side before.

In this condition he was dragged out into the night, where he was surrounded by a hooting crowd.

Boldly Edith forced her way into the midst.

"Stop!" she commanded, throwing her arm about the boy and striking away the hand that held him.

Shivering with terror, Little Ah Sin sunk upon his knees at her feet, clinging to her skirts.

CHAPTER X.

"TO BE HANGED BY THE NECK."

BUT the bloody creese and the signs of the dragging of the body to the whirlpool, added to the blood on Little Ah Sin's person, seemed to form a continuous chain of evidence which Edith could not combat.

In vain she appealed to Jim Stebbins.

"No unlawful harm shall come to him," he assured her. "We'll take him up to Rodger's Flat, an' he'll stand his trial. I'm free to say that it looks to me like a dead open-and-shut; but ef the lawyers kin git him off, that's their privilege."

Little Ah Sin was in too much of a panic to defend himself. He only begged to be saved from the mob.

"Promise me," said Edith, holding to Jim's arm, "that you will be responsible for his protection until he is in the hands of the officers of the law."

"I swar that, ma'am."

And so the culprit was led away.

Edith went back to Mrs. Swayne.

The woman, with her hair hanging in strings, looked as if she were insane.

Reaching out her bony arm, she clutched Edith by the wrist, and dragging her to the bedside, cried:

"Tell me all! What has become of him?"

"Dear aunt Mercy!" began Edith, who would have saved her the painful recital until she was more composed.

But the woman snarled with rage:

"Don't 'dear' me! I tell you I want the truth and the whole truth, without prevarication. What is this uproar going on outside? Have they caught him?"

"Yes, aunt Mercy," said Edith, misunderstanding to whom Mrs. Swayne referred.

The woman fell back on the bed with a groan of despair.

"Try not to think of it!" pleaded Edith, bending over her, and trying to put her arm consolingly about her.

"God's curse is upon us all!" groaned the un-

happy mother. "It is of no use to struggle and pray. Hell is our portion!"

"Oh, hush! hush!" shuddered Edith.

"What will they do with him?" suddenly cried Mrs. Swayne, once more seizing Edith, and reading her face with bloodshot eyes, while she held her so close to her that her hot breath fanned her cheek.

"Oh, I don't know! Let us not speak of it!"

"But I will speak of it!" shouted the mother, with wild violence. "They will hang him—that's what they will do! And it serves him right, the ingrate!"

But the natural love of a mother overcame her, and she fell back with a scream of anguish, writhing as if in physical pain.

Supposing that she referred to Little Ah Sin, Edith did not have the key to this burst of emotion.

She only tried to soothe her with gentle touches and low-breathed words of sympathetic endearment.

But the woman flung her hands away, crying savagely:

"Tell me everything! Don't you see that I know nothing of what has happened? How am I to know what has become of my husband? Is he dead? What have they done with him?"

There was no use in endeavoring to spare her the horrible details. As gently as she could Edith told her the situation as it appeared to her.

At first Mrs. Swayne broke in upon the recital with sharp cries and groans; but as it dawned upon her that her son had not been apprehended, but that it was Little Ah Sin who was suspected of the crime, she started upright in bed, staring at Edith, with mouth agape.

She saw the chain of evidence in which the boy was ensnared. She knew well the strong bias of the prejudice against him. His denials would amount to nothing, if she chose to let him go to punishment in the place of her son.

"But a mother to betray her own child!" she thought. "That's monstrous! And to save an emissary of the devil!"

But that thought set in train others which led to a startling conclusion.

"An emissary of the devil!" she repeated to herself. "Why, see how it has all turned out. If it had been planned to catch him, it could not have been better arranged. First Abednego must have a motive strong enough to induce him to scourge the heathen with many stripes. What could more imbitter him than the effort to destroy our child's soul? Then the boy must have an apparent motive for revenge sufficient to incite to murder. The scourging supplied that. Then there was the knife. I alone know that Abednego took it from him. And the blood on his clothes, and the footprints, and his sneaking back to bed. I don't understand that at all. Can it be that, seeing Abednego's dead body, his hatred prompted him to throw it into the whirlpool?"

"At any rate, he is hopelessly involved. I alone can exculpate him. Ha! ha! my chance for revenge is thus thrust into my hands! He would hurl my child into the Bottomless Pit. I will at least leave him to the tender mercies of the hangman!"

While these fierce reflections passed through her mind, she sat staring straight into Edith's face, yet evidently not seeing her, but looking on into vacancy.

Her face looked as if it were chiseled out of stone. Its expression was terrible. As she came to the contemplation of Little Ah Sin on the gallows, she ground her teeth with rage.

Edith was horrified into silence. She feared that the woman was going mad. What dark thoughts could produce such an expression?

But suddenly another interpretation of the facts flashed across Mrs. Swayne's mind.

"An emissary of the devil!" she repeated. "Why, it has all been planned to turn out this way! Satan wants him to die—to die by my refusal to speak! See! Here's my love for my son—A mother loves her son, of course. There's nothing stronger than one's love for one's own children—after one has born them, and striven with them through all sorts of trials, and prayed over them when it seemed as if God had stopped his ears and turned his face away. Here's my love for my son and my hatred of the would-be destroyer of my daughter, both on one side sealing my lips. And what's on the other side? He's only a heathen, a follower after false gods;—that's to lessen my pity, you see."

"But he didn't do it!—he didn't do it! He's as innocent of that as I am! And I let him go to the gallows! That's—that's—"

"Murder!"

Coming after the dead silence that preceded

it, that last word burst out in a piercing scream, so startling that Edith sprang to her feet.

The woman clapped her hands over her ears, and shrieked again:

"The devil is bidding for my soul! He has husband and children—all! all!—and now comes my turn! Get thee behind me, Satan! I will not!—I will not! But, a mother's love for her child!—dear God, a mother must love her child!"

She clasped her hands and raised her streaming eyes in agonized supplication.

"Take away this cup, dear God!" she moaned. "It is too bitter! too bitter!"

She fell back upon the bed, gasping and moaning.

"She has gone mad!" sobbed Edith.

For days she nursed the afflicted woman tenderly. But nothing would still the conflict that was going on in her soul.

At times she was indeed delirious; and her fanaticism lay so near to madness, that her really rational moments could not be distinguished from those in which reason was dethroned.

The only difference was that, when her brain was wholly under the sway of the fever that consumed it, she would burst into wild denunciations of Little Ah Sin as the murderer of her husband and the destroyer of her children and herself; while at other times the fierce conflict between conscience and her fear of eternal punishment on the one side, and her love for her son on the other, would wring from her those heart-rending appeals to Heaven.

She would not be confined to her bed. After the first shock, she went about her accustomed household duties, but was liable to an outburst at any moment, when she would drop down upon her knees, and even at times writhe upon the floor.

Edith could do nothing but watch her, in constant fear that she might attempt some fatal violence against herself.

Meanwhile Little Ah Sin lay in prison awaiting his trial.

Edith visited him. She could not bring herself to fully believe that he had done this awful crime. She must talk the matter over with him.

She found him pale and emaciated, and greatly dejected. She could get out of him only one reply.

"No catchee killum. You makee talkee that mississee."

So great was her own agitation, and so fixed in her mind was the idea of Abednego Swayne's death, that she for the first time misinterpreted Little Ah Sin's speech.

He told her that the man *had not been killed*; and she understood him to say that *he had not killed him*.

For the rest, he referred her to Mrs. Swayne. She returned home with her heart like lead.

"I have been to see Little Ah Sin," she said, abruptly.

The woman, who was at the moment grinding coffee with the mill in her lap, did not start; but she turned her hot eyes upon Edith's face, and said:

"Well?"

"He denies the charge, aunt Mercy."

The woman stopped turning the mill, and sat staring at Edith and waiting in stony immobility.

"He told me to ask you," persisted the girl, keeping her eyes fixed upon the other's face, while she felt her heart quiver like an aspen leaf.

"Ask me what?" said the woman, in the same hard, metallic tone.

"I don't know. He said only that. He denied having done it, and I was to 'ask the missis.'"

"But what are you to ask? There is nothing to ask, and nothing to answer."

Then her teeth set down hard, and every muscle in her body seemed to become rigid. Her face took on a livid pallor, and her eyes glittered with the fire of delirium.

She rose to her feet, lifting her clinched hands to heaven, heedless of the mill which rolled from her lap to the floor.

Then she burst into a torrent of curses, calling down upon the head of the little culprit the most horrible calamities in this world and in the world to come.

Edith was stunned and filled with shuddering horror.

She turned and fled from the room; but as she crossed the threshold, she heard a heavy fall behind her, followed by dead silence.

She looked round. Mrs. Swayne lay on the floor, evidently in some sort of a fit, foaming at the mouth through clinched teeth.

After that there was no difference in her, except that her paroxysms of rage against Little Ah Sin were more frequent, invariably being the culmination of those periods of remorse when she cried out that the devil was intriguing for her soul.

So came the day of the trial, which Mrs. Swayne attended with the others.

From the first it was plain that every one, even to his Honor, had prejudged the case. A heathen Chinese accused was a heathen Chinese guilty.

All the testimony went dead against the prisoner.

Called to the witness stand, Mrs. Swayne had one of her attacks of delirium, and denounced Little Ah Sin so wildly and incoherently that it was evident that she was raving.

Later, in his charge to the jury, his Honor cautioned them not to consider her testimony; but that legal form did not remove its influence from their minds.

When Little Ah Sin was asked what he had to say in his own defense, he only repeated what he had said to Edith:

"No catchee killum that Joss pidgin man."

Then Edith sprung to her feet in sudden wild excitement.

"Oh, your Honor!" she cried breathlessly, "do you hear him?"

"I hear him, my dear young lady," said his Honor, gallantly; "but I confess that he does not make himself intelligible to the court. May we depend upon you to render what has been said into better English?"

"Oh, sir! I have made a mistake all along."

"I do not know what it is; but you shall have opportunity to correct it. We all attend you."

"He does not deny having killed Mr. Swayne—"

"Eh? I confess my surprise. I thought that the purport—"

But in her eagerness Edith interrupted the court without apology.

"But he says that he has not been killed at all!"

"My dear young lady! do I understand you?"

The whole court stared agape.

His Honor looked over his spectacles at Edith in a way that suggested a sudden change of feeling.

"Oh, sir! there can be no doubt about it!" she assured him, anxiously. "'No catchee killum that Joss pidgin man,' means 'The minister has not been killed.'"

"If I mistake not," said his Honor, with a labored politeness which savored of suspiciousness, "those are the same words that have been quoted before."

"The same, sir," admitted Edith.

"And yet your previous understanding of them seems to have been different."

Edith blushed.

"It was very stupid of me," she said, almost plaintively. "But I think I must have been so fully persuaded of Mr. Swayne's death that I did not give sufficient consideration to the exact words used."

"Precisely," said his Honor. "Any other supposition is so preposterous, that I think that even you—with your evident partiality for the prisoner—will hesitate to entertain it, his protestations notwithstanding."

That was what his Honor called "sitting down on the witness."

Edith was dumb.

But the half-crazed brain of Mrs. Swayne had caught at the idea advanced. She lost the identity of the person on trial, every once in a while thinking that it was Jack. So she caught at any pretext to defend him.

She sprung to her feet and cried out:

"But it is true, your Honor! He is not dead. My husband was suddenly called away on business."

But when an officer of the court insisted upon her sitting down, she grew violent, denouncing Little Ah Sin again, and calling down the vengeance of heaven in quittance of her husband's blood.

While the jury was deliberating she became icily calm.

They rendered a unanimous verdict of guilty of murder in the first degree.

Then she rose to her feet again.

"Stop!" she cried, in a voice that thrilled through everybody.

All looked expectantly in the direction in which she pointed her long bony finger.

"Do you see him?" she cried, in a hoarse, rasping whisper. "It is the devil! He is chuckling to think he has secured my soul! See! see!"

She uttered a piercing shriek, and fled headlong to cast herself at his Honor's feet.

So startled was he that his spectacles were

thrown from his nose and crunched under his retreating heel.

"My good woman!" was the beginning of his protest.

But she burst in upon his bland speech.

"Listen! The boy is as innocent as I or you!"

Then turning to the imaginary demon:

"Satan, I shall escape your hands! I defy you and all your subtle arts! You may break a mother's heart, but you shall not have that which is God's!"

And again to his Honor:

"It was the son who slew his father. Let the boy go. He is innocent, I say. He has only been used by the arch-fiend to ensnare my soul!"

"The poor woman is quite distraught," stammered his Honor, nervously. "Take her away."

But, mistaking for the fiend in person, the officer who came to remove her, Mrs. Swayne swooned with terror.

Little Ah Sin was sentenced to be hanged, and remained to prison to await the day of execution.

CHAPTER XI.

DELIVERANCE.

ALL night long Edith had lain awake, conning over the strange expressions Mrs. Swayne had let fall during her moments of ungovernable excitement.

Until now she had been too much shocked to stop to reason out the possible meaning of that oft-repeated cry that "the devil was bidding for her soul."

Now she associated it with Mrs. Swayne's declaration that Little Ah Sin was innocent.

If this declaration was made in defiance of Satan, then its opposite—the denunciation of Little Ah Sin—must have been in compliance with his wish.

Here then was a reasonable explanation. The Tempter was "bidding for her soul" by leading her into the sin of bearing false witness.

Heretoo was an explanation of the boy's reference to her to establish his innocence. He knew that she knew that he was guiltless, and that she could clear him by telling the truth.

Having got so far, Edith reverted to Little Ah Sin's declaration:—"No catchee killum!"—the man had not been killed.

At this point she was seized with a sudden horror.

"If uncle Abe is not dead, and aunt Mercy knows it, yet still accuses Little Ah Sin of his murder—"

She could go no further. The enormity of the conclusion stunned her. She dared not say, even to herself—not yet, at least—that it was all a plot to destroy Little Ah Sin.

Granted such inconceivable wickedness, what could be their motive?

Then came the thought of their fanatical hatred of the boy for having led little Jerusha to worship Joss.

"Oh, mercy!" she cried, clasping her hands in dismay. "I believe they are making a sacrifice of him, to appease the divine wrath! It is plain that the feeling that they are under a curse has become a monomania with them, so that their religion has become as dark and terrible as any form of paganism. But this is too horrible!"

However, the more she thought of it, the more everything seemed to point to the conclusion she had reached.

"But it is too wild a theory to hope to convince others of its truth," she said to herself.

"The judge scouted the idea that uncle Abe might yet be alive, without giving it a thought. He said at once that I was partial to Little Ah Sin. Everybody will look at it in that way, and they will hang him without stopping to investigate. Then if uncle Abe returns, it will only be a 'heathen Chinese,' and no one will care."

She wrung her hands with hopeless tears at this thought.

But at that instant Jim Stebbins flashed across her mind. She remembered her influence over him; and he had expressed the wish that Little Ah Sin would not be caught.

There was no chance of sleep after that. She could not even keep in bed. She rose and dressed, and even went out into the night, watching for the first gleam of dawn, so that she might tell him her suspicions and enlist him in her cause.

He expressed his surprise at seeing her astir so early.

"I have something to say to you," she explained—"something of so vital importance that I could not wait."

"I'm listenin' to ye, ma'am; an' ef thar's anythin' I kin do fur ye, ye know it's as good as done before ye ask it."

"Thank you! I shall never forget your kindness, if you will do what I wish you to now."

He listened with undisguised astonishment as she laid her suspicions before him. His face became so troubled that she hesitated to state the action she wished him to take in the matter, until she had won him to her view.

"Miss Edith, ma'am," he said slowly, "not meanin' no disrespect to you, ye onderstand, this hyar's a big thing to swaller. You furgit that it's murder that you're chargin' onto the boss and his lady. They're cranky—I'll admit that; but they mean to do the square thing. I allow that the Lord don't come down on us half so rough as they let on. But ef they're so afraid of Him in leetle things, it don't stand to reason that they'd walk straight into hell-fire by murderin' a boy in this hyar cold-blooded fashion."

In vain she urged the fanaticism that had led to the cruel flagellation.

"The boss was mad then," said Jim, in extenuation; "an' I allow as it warn't more'n nater, lookin' at the thing from his stand-p'int. An' I reckon a man don't burn forever fur hidin' a boy, even ef he comes down on him purty rough. But murder—that's a different thing."

Edith was in despair. She could not make Jim understand that fanaticism could be carried to such an extreme that the deluded devotee might think he was justified in destroying those whom he considered the enemies of God.

"I allow that everybody knows that murder is murder," he said, "an' ef thar's one place down below that's hotter than another, it will be kept fur a man that deliberately plots for another's blood. Ef a man stands up an' takes his chance, it may be a fair shake; but a snake in the grass, what's too cowardly to resk his own skin—the Lord hain't no use fur none sich. I know!"

Edith gave up the struggle, too much dispirited to brush away the tears that rolled down her cheeks.

Jim glanced at them uneasily. They "struck him where he lived."

"I'll tell ye what I'll do, though," he said, at last.

She looked at him inquiringly, but said nothing.

"The boy has been put on mighty rough. The boss wasn't satisfied with that thrashin' an' we don't know what he might 'a' been doin' to him when he laid him out. Takin' all this hyar into consideration, I'll agree to pull him out o' the lock-up an' turn him loose. Ef he can't take care of himself then, that'll be his lookout."

"Oh! will you do that?—will you do that?" cried Edith, in her excess of gratitude fairly throwing her arms about Jim.

He blushed and stammered, and in his embarrassment released himself from her embrace. But she still held his hand and thanked him over and over again.

"I would rather you thought him innocent, as I do," she said. "But, if from any motive you will release him, it will give us time to look for uncle Abe; and some day you may be glad that you yielded to pity so far."

Then they proceeded to lay their plans, except that Jim insisted that Edith should take no active share.

"Bein's as how you're a lady," he explained, "it hain't the thing fur you to run ag'in' the law. A man like me, now, kin take care of himself. Ef they don't like my style, they know what they kin do."

And Edith, with a woman's confidence in his ability to meet any emergency, allowed him to take this risk.

That night the constable at Rodger's Flat was startled from his sleep, to find a masked man in his bed-chamber, holding a revolver to his head, while another was climbing in at the window, through which the heads of several more were visible.

"Hold on, boys," he said, at once jumping to the conclusion that these were lynchmen, who had come to take his prisoner out and hang him to the nearest tree. "Whar's the use o' doin' this thing irreg'lar, when the heathen's goin' to hang anyhow? Can't you keep yer shirts on fur a few days?"

Only the ominous *click! click!* of the lifted cock of the revolver answered him.

He knew what was expected of him, and made no resistance when the second man produced a bit of rope with which to bind him.

"It's all right, boys," he said, not ill-naturedly. "But go as light as you kin on the gag."

You'll find the keys in my trousers, over the back of the chair."

Without a word further he was gagged, the keys were got, and the intruders slipped through the window as noiselessly as shadows.

If such a thing were possible, Little Ah Sin's queue would have stood on end with terror, as he saw the men who had come for him.

He, too, expected that a few minutes would seal his doom.

But, fearing that he might cry out in alarm, Jim Stebbins bent and whispered in his ear:

"Look a-hyar, youngster! do ye onderstand me? I'm a-goin' fur to take ye to Lady Edith. Now, we don't want narry yawp out o' ye; or you'll knock the whole thing in the head, an' swing sure!"

Dimly Little Ah Sin comprehended that these were friends, sent by his patroness. He recognized Jim's voice, and remembered that he had interfered before at Edith's instigation.

He clung to his hand, sobbing with gratitude.

Out into the night he was taken, and away from the mining-camp into the mountains.

There, when the day was just dawning, he was given food. Then a revolver and knife were thrust into his belt, and a small stock of food was supplied in a bundle.

"Now git!" said Jim. "An' don't furgit that you owe all this hyar to Lady Edith."

"That missee," urged Little Ah Sin. "China boy wanchee lookee him. No walkee, he no makee talkee that missee."

Jim had learned enough of pidgin English to understand that Little Ah Sin now declared his unwillingness to go until he had seen Edith.

"That's your own lookout," he said, carelessly. "But hyar's whar we leave you; an' ef you let 'em git their hooks onto you ag'in, up a tree you go sizzlin'!"

Without more ado he rode away with his men, and Little Ah Sin stood looking after them as they went.

At Rodger's Flat the predicament of the constable was discovered early in the morning. He was so regular in getting his "eye-opener," that his non-appearance caused his cronies to go and rap him up.

That Little Ah Sin should have friends who had effected his rescue, was so unlikely that no one entertained the thought. It was generally agreed that he had been "taken care of" by friends of the supposed murdered man, for whom the ordinary process of law was too slow.

So, after a flimsy show of search, the matter was dropped.

Meanwhile Edith had made a discovery which piqued her curiosity.

A change had occurred in Mrs. Swayne's habits. Her, who in the past had scarcely ever gone beyond the door-yard, she detected leaving the house at nightfall, with every appearance of trying to avoid observation.

It was not until she was out of sight, that the thought flashed through Edith's mind:

"She has gone to meet uncle Abe!"

She would have rushed after the woman at once, but for the fear of betraying herself.

"No, no!" she said to herself. "I must wait for another opportunity, and then follow her so closely as to keep her in sight, so that if she stops to look back, I can hide."

After that she dressed in dark flannel, without a gleam of white anywhere visible, and never let Mrs. Swayne out of her sight after sundown.

Not only this, but her anxiety kept her wakeful every night till long after midnight, to fall into a troubled sleep in the early morning hours.

This last was fortunate. On the second occasion she heard Mrs. Swayne stealing from the house, after having once gone to bed.

In a quiver of excitement Edith slipped into her dress, thrust her feet into a pair of soft bedroom slippers, and so crept after the woman with the noiseless tread of a cat.

CHAPTER XII.

LITTLE AH SIN "ON DECK."

AFTER satisfying herself that she had escaped from the house unobserved, Mrs. Swayne took no further precautions, and indeed seemed so absorbed in her dark reflections as to become oblivious to her surroundings.

She strode rapidly forward, so that Edith had almost to run to keep her in sight. It was lucky for the girl that she had rambled over all the vicinity until every spot was so familiar that she could avoid obstructions in the winding path as if by instinct.

The night was a moonlit one, obscured by clouds. The wind swept them across the heavens like startled phantoms, now shrouding the

world in dense gloom, and anon flooding it with cold, silvery light.

In one of these dark moments Edith lost sight of Mrs. Swayne. She was about to rush forward, with her heart in her mouth, in the fear that all of her labor was lost, when she was deterred by the sound of a base voice.

At the same instant she caught sight of a point of light, and her nostrils were greeted by the aroma of a cigar.

"Are you here at last?" asked the voice, which Edith recognized with a start as that of not uncle Abe, but his son. "Why have you failed these two nights past; and why have you kept me half through this night?"

"It has been impossible to get away," replied the woman. "The girl has taken it into her head that I need constant watching—"

"Watching?" interrupted Jack, with evident agitation in his tremulous tones.

"Oh, not on your account," was his mother's assurance. "But have you not driven me nearly mad? I suppose she is afraid that I will commit some act of violence against myself."

The way in which this was said showed that her mind was beginning to be haunted by the lurking demons of meditated suicide.

Jack passed over that and sprung to self-defense.

"Have I not told you, again and again," he protested, passionately, "that I did not mean to kill him? He threatened to arrest me with his own hand, and have me hanged for stopping the coach. And he would have done it—I saw it in his eye. It was this crazy folly of yours and his about destroying my body and saving my soul. You know that I could not have escaped him, if he had got hold of me. Do you fancy, then, that I am ready to be sold out so stupidly? I grabbed the first thing that came handy to fight him off with. I only wanted to get away, and he had barred the door."

In these words, uttered with headlong precipitancy—words with which he had over and over again, ever since that fatal night, tried to justify, or at least palliate, his act to himself—Jack Swayne gave Edith the key to the whole situation.

In one aspect this was a relief to her. That Mrs. Swayne should betray Little Ah Sin to death in order to save her son, was less terrible than that she should enter into a deliberate plot for revenge.

"Let us not speak of that," said Mrs. Swayne. "But how much longer are you going to expose yourself and me to this risk? I tell you, I cannot get the money. Drake has refused point-blank, finally hinting that any act of mine in my present situation might be open to legal question."

"Then I'm as good as done for!" cried Jack, in despair. "Remember, there is one opening always awaiting me. I can join Harrigan's Band to-morrow, if I wish."

The mother uttered a fierce cry of protest. "It is the money, or outlawry!" persisted Jack, doggedly. "I must live! I'd rather not be a road-agent; but I won't be a tramp, with both pockets turned inside out from year's end to year's end!"

"Is that the only alternative?" asked the mother.

"I wish I might find another!"

"Honest work!"

"Work? Excuse me! I don't think it agrees with my constitution."

"You were doomed to hell before the world began!" cried the mother, with an intensity born of her despair, which gave her the authoritative air of a prophetess.

Edith shuddered.

Jack laughed—the reckless laugh of a man who had braced his nerves with liquor.

"Don't give us any more of that rot!" he cried. "The question is, will you, or won't you raise the money for me?"

"You sordid ingrate!" cried his mother, now stung to fury by his ridicule of her religious belief. "Is it not enough that your soul is steeped in the blood of your father?—is it not enough that I have jeopardized my soul to save you from the righteous wrath of men, and give you another chance to conciliate the vengeance of Heaven? Wretch! can nothing rouse you from your soulless levity to one pang of remorse?"

"Mother!" cried the young man, now seeing that he had carried his recklessness too far.

"Lay the weight of your finger on me, and I will strike you in the face!" cried the exasperated mother. "From this moment I cast you out of my heart, and forget you, as God has forgotten you!"

As she delivered this curse the moon broke

from behind the clouds and flooded with light the glade in which she stood, revealing her with her right hand upraised and her eyes blazing.

But the mad paroxysm choked her, and she turned to beat a hasty retreat.

Her son, startled into sobriety, rushed after her.

Their movements were so quick and unexpected that Edith could not get out of their way.

At sight of her the mother started back with a scream, as if she had come upon a ghost.

Jack stopped aghast.

Discovered, Edith's high courage asserted itself, and she stepped boldly forth.

"You have been eavesdropping!" cried Jack, fear uppermost the moment he recovered himself.

"I have acquired evidence of Little Ah Sin's innocence!" replied Edith, unflinchingly.

"And of my guilt?"

"Exactly!"

"To be used against me?"

"To be used to give back to Little Ah Sin his rightful place among honest men."

"You dare not betray me!"

"I dare establish the truth!"

"At my expense?"

"At any cost, to myself or others."

"By Jove! I like you!" cried Jack, with a sudden burst of admiration. "I have liked you from the first moment my eyes rested upon you. I determined to possess you then, by hook or by crook; and now the way to silence you and the way to make myself the happiest of mortals are one and the same!"

As he ceased speaking, he sprung forward to seize her, with a look on his face that could not be mistaken.

All in a flash she realized the peril that menaced her. She felt that she could hope for no succor from Mrs. Swayne. The woman already hated her; and in the character of one who was about to sacrifice her son for the vindication of a heathen she would be doubly odious to her. In such an exigency, she believed that mother-love would rise above even religious fanaticism.

Fear paralyzed her. Her feet felt like lead. She would have fallen an unresisting victim, but that there came a timely intervention.

"Hi yah! Makee that hand up! China boy catchee one teem drop, alla same likee 'Melican man!'"

And coming she knew not whence, Little Ah Sin suddenly appeared at her side, with a cocked revolver leveled at Jack Swayne's heart.

With a shout of dismay Jack checked his advance and sprung back. He had had one taste of Little Ah Sin's metal. Something told him that that other shot had been a scare, but that this one would "mean business."

Mrs. Swayne threw up her hands in despair, muttering helplessly:

"It is the work of the Evil One! He will surely triumph in the end!"

Jack next spoke to Edith, in a clear, firm voice.

"I know when I'm down," he said. "You've got me dead to rights. There's no white-washing that. But this determines me. Clear your little heathen in any way you like. Before you can put the hounds of the law on me, I shall have set them finally at defiance. Good-night!—and, ho for Harrigan's Band!"

He turned and sprung away; and a moment later was heard the clang of a horse's hoofs in rapid retreat.

Edith threw her arms about her *protege*.

"Oh! how glad I am!" she cried, sobbing for joy.

"We all lightee!" said Little Ah Sin, with a bland smile. "Now walkee, catchee that Jim Steb."

"What do you want of Jim?" asked Edith, wondering.

But Little Ah Sin only laughed, pulling her toward the house.

Upon reaching it, he without fear called all the hands of the ranch about him by firing off his revolver.

Laughing at their curious questions, when they had learned through Edith that his innocence was now fully established, he only insisted on their following him.

They were soon all in the saddle, and under his direction penetrated into the most inaccessible depths of the mountains.

There in a cave, where Little Ah Sin, having got lost, had come upon it by accident, they found a most pitiable figure. It was Abednego Swayne, awaiting a near deliverance from his misery.

He had thought to expiate his sins by becoming a hermit; but the long years of self-torture,

culminating in the shock of his son's attempt on his life, was too much for him. He was dying! He expired with his head in Edith's lap. And there, through his disjointed confession, while he hovered between life and death, she learned of the Curse of Blood which had hung over him and his, killing their peace on earth, and robbing them of their hope of heaven.

Edith's father and Abednego Swayne had been friends, as ill-assorted as ever friends were—the one a religious devotee, the other a happy-go-lucky fellow who believed in making the most of a very agreeable world.

George Vernon's worst faults were his want of reverence and his reckless disregard of the feelings of an opponent in controversy.

To such an extent did he goad Abednego Swayne in one of their frequent debates, that, in a transport of rage, the latter suddenly sprung upon him with a blow which knocked him over a precipice on the verge of which they were walking.

The tragedy had none of the essential elements of a murder, since nothing was further from Abednego's thoughts than to seriously injure his friend; but looking only at the fatal result, he felt that the brand of Cain was upon him.

Mrs. Swayne was a witness to the deed; and, her wifely love and loyalty overriding every other consideration, it was her suggestion that the world be left to the impression that George had fallen from the high; and she supplied the arguments in justification of such a course.

Men would not discriminate between deliberate malice and what was really an accident. On the other hand, God was just; he could be approached in prayer, and his forgiveness won. Then why should her husband voluntarily pass under the rigor of the less perfect law, breaking her heart and blighting the life of their child, little Jack?

She prevailed; and Abednego Swayne was made the guardian of the orphan child of his unfortunate friend.

Then these two resumed the journey of life under the shadow of their terrible secret. From that fatal day they knew no peace. Haunted by the Nemesis of conscience, their religion degenerated into a half-insane fanaticism, almost as gloomy as the terrible worship of the Druids.

In revolt against the rigors of such a home, Jack was goaded into recklessness, which, as we have seen, ended in his becoming an outlaw.

Mrs. Swayne did not accompany Edith and Little Ah Sin back to the house. From their parting with her in the moonlit glade, nothing was ever seen of her more. It was supposed that, in a fit of insanity, she had thrown herself into the whirlpool, believing that she was following her husband.

Only little Jerusha was saved, Edith making it her business to bring some late brightness into her childhood.

It was accident that led Little Ah Sin to stumble upon Jack while hanging about to gain access to Edith; and to this day he tells proudly—in tangle-foot English—how he twice "held up" Jack Swayne, the now famous road-agent, "alla same likee 'Melican man!'"

THE END.

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- 432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
- 456 Billy Brick, the Jolly Vagabond.
- 466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
- 479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Hearty.
- 488 Wild Dick Racket.
- 501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.

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- 2 Yellowstone Jack; or, The Trapper.
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- 65 Hurricane Bill; or, Mustang Sam and His Pard.
- 119 Mustang Sam; or, The King of the Plains.
- 136 Night-Hawk Kit; or, The Daughter of the Ranch.
- 144 Dainty Lance, the Boy Sport.
- 151 Panther Paul; or, Dainty Lance to the Rescue.
- 160 The Black Giant; or, Dainty Lance in Jeopardy.
- 168 Deadly Dash; or, Fighting Fire with Fire.
- 184 The Boy Trailers; or, Dainty Lance on the War-Path.
- 203 The Boy Pard; or, Dainty Lance Unmasks.
- 211 Crooked Cale, the Caliban of Celestial City.
- 310 The Barranca Wolf; or, The Beautiful Decoy.
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- 31 Keen-Knife, the Prince of the Prairies.
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- 58 The Border King; or, The Secret Foe.
- 71 Delaware Dick, the Young Renyer Spy.
- 74 Hawk-eye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger.
- 83 Rollo, the Boy Ranger.
- 134 Sure Shot Seth, the Boy Rifleman.
- 143 Sear-Face Saul, the Silent Hunter.
- 146 Silver Star, the Boy Knight.
- 153 Eagle Kit, the Boy Demon.
- 163 Little Texas, the Young Mustang.
- 178 Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper.
- 182 Little Hurricane, the Boy Captain.
- 202 Prospect Pete; or, The Young Outlaw Hunter.
- 208 The Boy Hercules; or, The Prairie Tramps.
- 218 Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror.
- 224 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Castle.
- 228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.
- 238 The Parson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.
- 245 The Disguised Guide; or, Wild Raven, the Ranger.
- 260 Dare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.
- 272 Minkskin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.
- 290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy.
- 300 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.
- 334 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.
- 409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
- 417 Webfoot Mose, the Tramp Detective.
- 422 Baby Sam, the Boy Giant of the Yellowstone.
- 444 Little Buckskin, the Young Prairie Centaur.
- 457 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Polar Saul.
- 463 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.
- 473 Old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic.
- 482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.

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- 23 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
- 37 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
- 47 Nightingale Nat; or, The Forest Captain.
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- 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 123 Klowa Charley, the White Mustang.
- 139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack From Red Core.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
- 198 Arkansaw; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
- 207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
- 215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Topknot's Crusade.
- 231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jezebel.
- 241 Bill Bravo; or, The Roughs of the Rockies.
- 255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowtie.
- 267 The Buckskin Detective.
- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
- 294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowie Blade of Cochetopa.
- 302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Boy Bully.
- 316 Old Eclipse, Trump Card of Arizona.
- 326 The Ten Pard; or, The Terror of Take-Notice.
- 336 Big Benson; or, The Queen of the Lasso.
- 345 Pitiless Matt; or, Red Thunderbolt's Secret.
- 356 Cool Sam, the Pard; or, The Terrible Six.
- 366 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.
- 386 Captain Cutlass; or, The Buccaneer's Girl Foe.
- 396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.
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- 425 Texas Trump, the Border Rattler.
- 436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox.
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- 477 The Excelsior Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.
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